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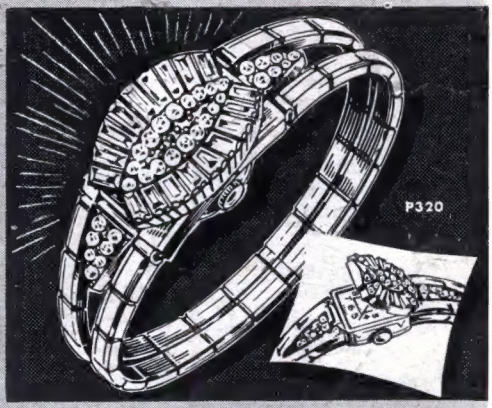

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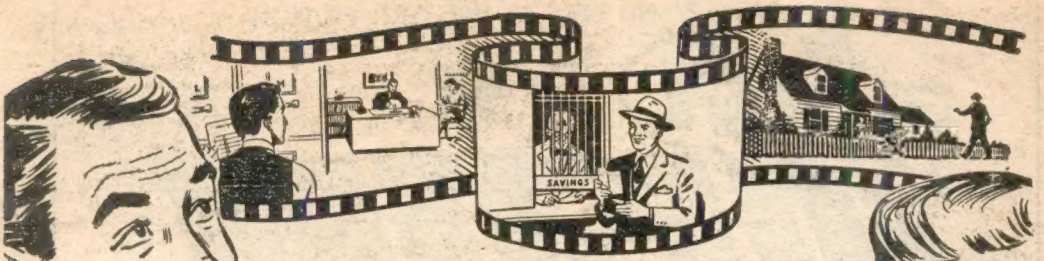

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Two dead, back-shot punchers mutely warned Red Cortland, C. A. man, that the third was due pronto—in the form of one carrot-topped range detective.

BLIND CANYON MANHUNT.....Van Cort 49
Three things stood between Hepburn and prison: His gun, the promise of a stranger he didn't trust, and the lie of a woman he must believe in.

BEANS AND BULLETS FREE!.....William R. Cox 84
The Ratchet spread was a run-down wreck . . . Yet seven tough courageous men were willing to die for a chance to own it."

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BLOOD ON THE TETON RIM.....Al Storm 32
When Ike Parish rode shotgun on the treasure stage, his owlhoot pardners figured they had a golden fortune already in their hands. . . .

WHEEL CITY HEADS WEST.....Noel Loomis 41
If Wayne Foster couldn't clean up the town with red-hot lead bullets, he'd tell 'em with hot lead type!

BOOTHILL VACATION.....Francis Ames 60
He died with a bushwhack slug in his belly—and a smile on his face.

A NICE NECK FOR A NOOSE!.....A. C. Abbott 68
In the dim light he saw the noose looping down from the limb . . . then he felt a friendly arm about his shoulders. . . .

THE DESERT FIGHTERS.....Harlan Graves 77
Fifty sun-scorched miles of desert lay ahead of them, and Death waited every staggering step of the way.

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COW COUNTRY FEATURE

THE STRAWBOSS.....A Department 6

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THE STRAWBOSS

IN THE days of the Old West, hangings came to people as easy as rolling off a log. They really whooped it up and called them necktie parties, trying to mask their grim regret with pleasantries. But it was a serious business, and it happened often.

Once you found the noose around your neck, you had to be a pretty shrewd hombre to slip it off again. But some few men managed to do just that. Here, for example, John T. Lynch tells the story of Long Jim Henry, a man who didn't have sense enough to make the best of a good thing. He could talk the ears off a mule, but he had to talk really fast when he found himself about to walk on air. . . .

—

YANK YOST had just put the finishing touches on the grave he had dug for Long Jim Henry. With a grunt of self-satisfaction, he gave a final pad to the mound of dirt piled beside the gaping hole.

This was the fifth grave Yank Yost had created within the past four days and, with the ten dollars he would collect for this one, he could go on a de luxe, extry-special fifty-dollar drunk. Of course, he couldn't taper on until he had completed this job, come morning, because his ten dollar grave-digging fee always included closing the grave after the coffin had been lowered into it. But the covering-up part was easy, compared with the actual digging. The next morning, all he had to do was toss this dirt down on the coffin containing the body of Long Jim Henry, collect his fee from the undertaker, and start on his binge. . . .

That afternoon in July of 1869, Yank was so engrossed in admiring his latest grave and contemplating the happy weekend to come that he didn't notice that someone had walked into the little but growing graveyard on the outskirts of Green Hat, Montana.

"That's a right nice grave you got there," said a voice. "Who's it for?"

"You must be a stranger in Green Hat," answered Yank, without looking up. "It's for Long Jim Henry. An hour ago, they

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

was puttin' a rope around his neck an' was just about to pull him up. I didn't wait around. They're goin' to bury Long Jim in this hole come mornin'."

"I say, you seem to be kind of mistaken," insisted the other.

Yank, irritated by the insistent tone of the speaker, turned abruptly to face him. It was Long Jim Henry.

"L-L-Long Jim!" stammered Yank. "You're dead!"

"No, I ain't," insisted Long Jim. "I ain't even a little bit dead."

"Yes, you are, too. You're a ghost. That's what you are. A damn ghost—." Yank took another step backward.

"You better watch out," the ghost said helpfully. "You'll back plumb into that grave. Here, feel me, if you think I ain't real." He generously took a few steps toward Yank. Yost, anxious to keep a goodly distance from Long Jim, promptly retreated a few more paces almost to the edge of the open hole.

Long Jim Henry ran out of patience. So far, it had been a very bad day for him. He jumped toward Yank. Yank stepped back into space and disappeared from sight. The bump he got on landing at the bottom of the dark grave brought Yank to his everyday senses. He suddenly realized that he did not believe in ghosts, and never had.

"I've had enough of this foolishment," said Long Jim Henry. "Just hand over what money you got, then I'll take your horse, an' I'll be on my way." Long Jim, twice as large and muscular as Yank, grabbed the little grave digger, pinned his arms, and took Yank's already-acquired binge money. Forty dollars. "Thanks," said Long Jim, throwing Yank on the dirt mound beside the grave. "Lucky I came by this way. I was broke, and afoot. Your horse and this money is just what I needed. Goodbye—."

Long Jim laughed, turned on his heel, and walked to Yank's horse, tethered to a nearby tombstone. "Hate to rob a little runt of a gravedigger," said Long Jim. "Like takin' whisky from a baby—."

Long Jim's words were cut short. Yank, sprawled on the dirt mound, quickly and quietly got to his feet as the bigger man walked toward the horse. Noiselessly, Yank grabbed his shovel and sneaked up behind Long Jim. As the big man leaned down to loosen the tether, Yank swung with the shovel with all the strength at his command. The metal edge, jagged from much use, crashed into Long Jim's right temple. As Long Jim crumpled to the ground, Yank followed up with several more quick blows, any one of which would have been fatal.

Yank Yost first retrieved his forty dollars, then dragged the body over to the grave and, after much pushing and pulling, succeeded in dumping it into the waiting hole. Then he hastened into town.

"Sven," Yank told the undertaker, "you can pay me now for Long Jim Henry's grave. I can cover it up this evening, instead of waiting until tomorrow mornin."

Sven Talman shook his head sadly.

"But Long Jim ain't dead."

"Yes he is," said Yank. "Both dead an' in his grave."

"No, he ain't. You see, Yank, they didn't hang him. They changed their minds at th' last minute. The rope was already around his neck when he spoke up an' made it impossible to rightly hang him. He was a smart hombre—a good talker. So he is still alive—."

"No, he ain't," insisted Yank Yost.

"Yank, don't keep butting in. I'll tell you what happened after you left to go out an' dig th' grave. When they ask Long Jim if he had any last words to say, he said he did. He said, 'I don't see how you can rightly hang me when I didn't get that money from th' bank. You all got it. Not me.'"

(Continued on page 108)

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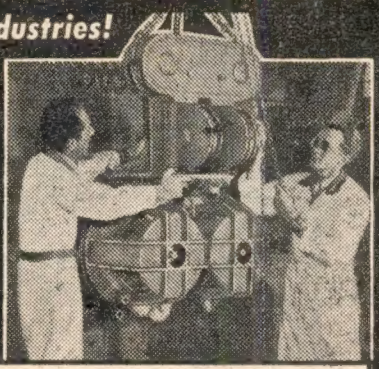

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The man lay with his face pressed into the sand, dead. . . .

THE RIDER FROM WIND RIVER

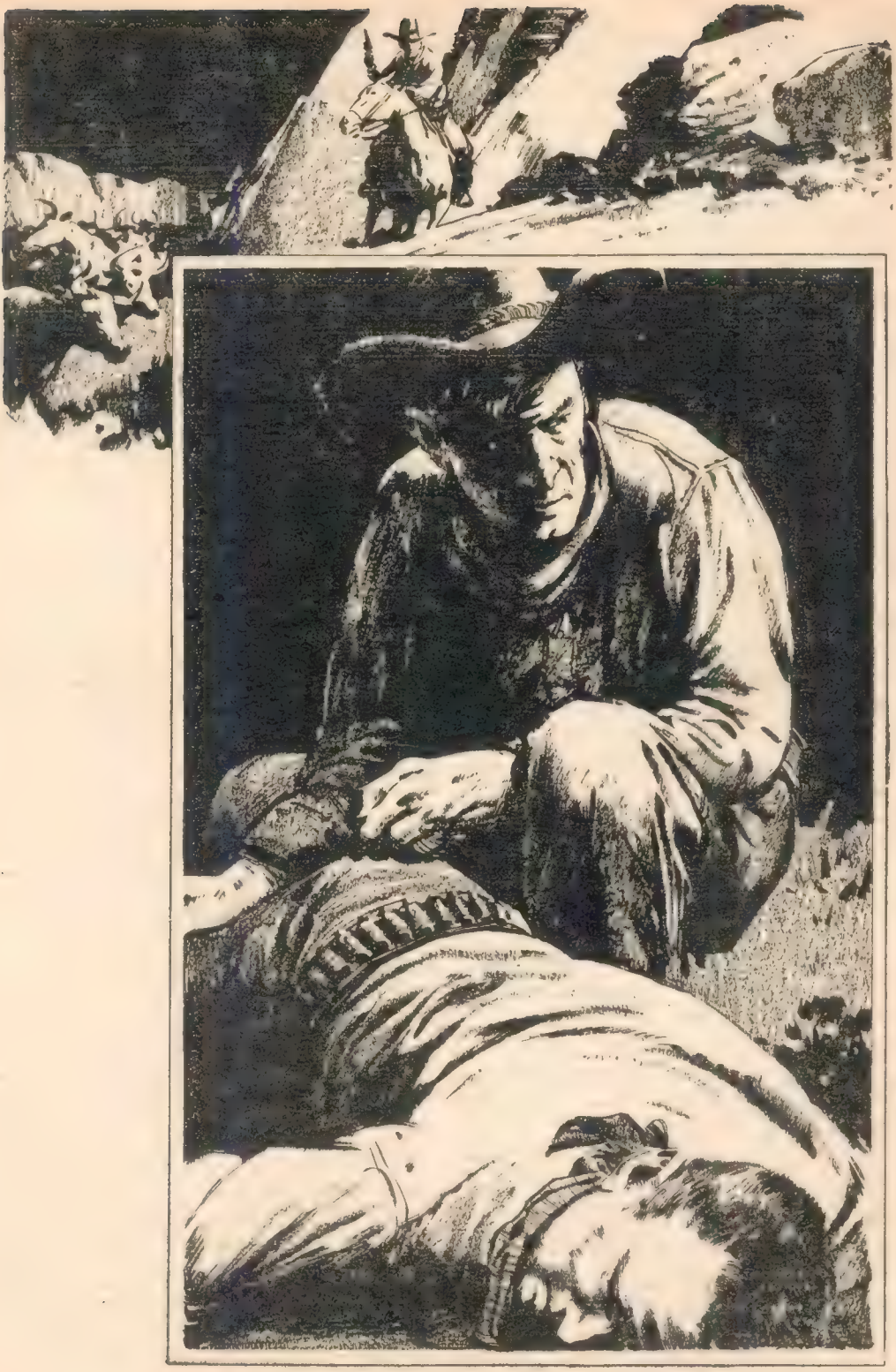
By H. A. DeROSSO

Red Cortland had discovered two dead men with bullets in their backs since he had come to Bridlebit. . . . And suddenly he realized that if he didn't move fast, the next bullet-shattered body would be his own!

ALL that morning, Red Cortland had been troubled, apprehensive. He could not understand why. There was nothing to cause him to feel this way. It was something phantasmal and forbidding, lurking deep in his mind, so deep that he could not know exactly what it was, though he knew he did not like it.

Perhaps it was the lonely country that made him feel this way. The mountain peaks reared high and barren, and the valleys and meadows seemed to have been tucked away slyly in niches and crevices to escape notice. The vegetation, while not sparse, was not ample either. Nut pines and junipers grew in isolated patches among the gray sands and mesquite, and sage and manzanita huddled lonesomely under the immense and cruel sky. This was a land for the lonesome crying of a coyote and the mournful hooting of an owl and the lamenting wail of the wind.

Cortland reined in his buckskin and hooked a long leg about the saddlehorn



while he built a smoke. He was a tall, slim man with a rather narrow face marked by a pair of hard blue eyes. His long red hair straggled down around his ears, and he wore a high-crowned Stetson, with the rim curled up at the sides, a red and black flannel shirt, and blue levis over which he had drawn a pair of tight buckskin leggins. The spurs on his heels were plain with small steel rowels. The gun in his holster was a .44 Frontier Colt with a seven-and-a-half inch barrel.

He smoked thoughtfully, slouching a little as he sat there in his kak, wondering why he should feel so uneasy. The land was lonely, but he had been in lonelier places than this. In fact, he rather liked solitude, and so the chill apprehension he had was more than the result of being in a desolate and forsaken country.

A brief memory flitted through his mind, and he put the recollection away angrily. It was something he did not like to think about. So far as Red Cortland was concerned he had no past. He had been born when he had gone to work here at Bridlebit a month ago.

He frugally smoked the cigarette down to the tiniest butt. It was not so long ago that tobacco had been a scarce and precious item to him and he still had not shaken the habit of consuming as much of a smoke as he could. He rubbed out the butt and tossed it away. He put his foot back in the stirrup and was about to start the buckskin when he saw the vulture.

The bird was wheeling high in the sky and all at once it darted down, straight as an arrow, and Cortland watched it until a slope ahead cut it from view. There was something insistent in the beating of his heart now; the feeling of apprehension grew stronger. A sudden impulse told him to bolt, to leave this country, but he had a new life here, and he was not going to throw it away.

Cortland sent the buckskin ahead, toward the spot where the vulture had vanished from sight. He glanced up at the sky once and saw another scavenger wheeling up there. Now a presentiment of evil descended on Cortland. He still could not understand why he should feel this way. These were not the first vultures he had seen, but these somehow seemed to be more than scavengers. They gave Cortland the impression they were harbingers of doom.

The buckskin started clambering up the slope. Cortland told himself he was imagining things. He was still jumpy and upset from what he had gone through in the past. Once he was on the other side of the hill, he told himself, he would find only a dead cow—some dead animal. But he didn't believe it. That disturbing prescience still would not leave him.

The buckskin topped the crest of the hill and started down the other side. The sound of its approach frightened the vulture, and it rose into the air with a monstrous, foul flapping of its great black wings. Cortland watched it wheel away, a feeling of loathing stirring in him. The buckskin took another half dozen strides, and then Cortland saw what it was that had attracted the vultures.

It was a man.

He lay with his face pressed into the sand, his arms flung out and his legs wide apart, almost as if he had been spread-eagled, held motionless and fixed by the laxness and stillness of death.

Cortland reined in the buckskin beside the dead man and looked around. He saw nothing but desolation and emptiness—the land, the hills, the sky. The only living things were he and the buckskin and the two vultures, now wheeling and banking with an unclean patience overhead.

That chill on the back of Cortland's neck was very pronounced now. His throat began to constrict as if an invisible band circling his neck were slowly being tightened. There was an icy breeze sweeping down off the mountain, but still sweat broke out on Cortland's brow.

His heart was banging away. He felt the burst of panic, but subdued it. He had seen dead men before, he told himself, but he knew that it was not the dead man but what he might imply that was so disturbing.

Again the urge came to Cortland to flee. Considering what lay in his past, this seemed the wise thing to do. But then Cortland decided that, if he were to pick up and leave the country, people would think that he, Red Cortland, was involved in the killing. To prove his innocence, he would have to stay and report the man's death.

As he dismounted, the muscles in his thighs were quivering and his heart pounded in his ears like a drum.

THE dead man's name was Orrin Woodward. Cortland learned this after he had hauled the corpse to Bridlebit. Woodward had been shot in the back, but from what Cortland had observed he figured that Woodward had been killed elsewhere and then brought to the north end of Bridlebit and dumped. Cortland could not understand why this deduction should leave him full of dark misgiving.

Cortland brought in Woodward's body mainly because of the vultures. He had no idea where the man had lived, but there would have been no sense in burying the man since the sheriff undoubtedly would have had him exhumed, and the thought of the vultures working on the dead man appalled him. So he had slung the corpse behind the cantle of his saddle and ridden in to Bridlebit.

Bob Forrest, who owned Bridlebit, had identified the dead man and then had sent one of his riers, Whitey Alderson, to get the sheriff. Forrest did not question Cortland, and for this Cortland was thankful. He did not want to talk about it.

Cortland went to the bunkhouse. He knew where Whitey Alderson had a bottle, and, although Cortland was not much of a drinking man, he dug up the bottle and had a couple of hearty swallows, replaced the bottle, and lay down on his bunk. He just could not get over his uneasiness.

He lay there on his back, staring up at the ceiling. Now he let memory of the past come to him. There was nothing good to remember, he thought. He had been a wild kid, and he had got in with the wrong company, and he had rustled cattle and had been sent to prison. He had no excuses to make for what he had done, and he felt no resentment for the years he had spent in the pen. So far as he was concerned that was all past. He was confident that all the wildness was gone from him. All he wanted now was a chance to lead an honest and useful life.

No one in this country knew about Red Cortland's past except Bob Forrest. They had known each other up in the Wind River country, and, when Cortland was ready to be released from prison, he had received a letter from Forrest offering him a job at Bridlebit. Forrest had pointed out that Bridlebit was far from the Wind River country and that here no one knew about Cortland's past; thus he would have an excellent opportunity to start over again without the stigma of an ex-convict. Forrest had promised never to reveal Cortland's past. So Cortland had ridden south and hired out to Bridlebit. He counted Bob Forrest as the only friend he had in the world.

Cortland answered the call to supper, but he picked at his food and drank two cups of coffee, and then he went back to the bunkhouse. After a while, Burt Marlow entered. He was the third and last of Forrest's employees. Marlow was a dark and sullen man with the bearing of a tough about him. Cortland had never liked him and could not understand why Forrest had ever hired him. This was one of several disquieting things about Bridlebit. Cortland felt ashamed to have these thoughts, for he owed a lot to Bob Forrest.

Nightfall came, and the time dragged on.

Cortland kept seeing the dead man with his face pushed in the sand. Now and then he was conscious of Marlow's glance, hard and piercing, on him, but whenever Cortland looked at the man, he appeared to be engrossed in his game of solitaire. The two men did not speak a single word.

Finally, Cortland heard the sounds of two horses coming into the yard of Bridlebit. The creak of saddle leather and the jingle of bit chains were sharp and distinct on the chill night air. These sounds ceased as the horses came to a halt and were followed by a murmur of voices and then silence again. Cortland supposed that, if this were the sheriff, he and the others had gone to view the body which had been placed in the saddle shed.

Some time later the bunk house door opened and three men came in. One of them was Whitey Alderson. Fatigue lay in the deep lines of Whitey's face, and he went directly to his bunk and dropped down on it without removing his boots.

The second man was Bob Forrest. He was a tall, well-built fellow, broad in the shoulders and heavy in the chest but with the slim waist and flat hips of the horseman. He had a wide, pleasant face, and he affected a tawny mustache that drooped down around the corners of his mouth.

The third man had a sheriff's star pinned to his shirt under his unbuttoned, flannel-lined, denim jacket. He was a stocky man of medium height. He had steel-gray hair and hard gray eyes, and his cheeks were flat and almost gaunt; his mouth was a tight, stern line. The sheriff's eyes fastened on Cortland and then never left him.

Bob Forrest said, "This is Sheriff Al Zimmerman, Red. He'd like to ask you a few questions."

Cortland said nothing. He just stared back at Zimmerman. Icy fingers were playing with Cortland's neck.

"Are you Cortland?" asked the sheriff. His voice was soft, but there was the touch of steel in it.

Cortland nodded.

"Did you find Woodward?"

Again Cortland nodded.

"Where did you find him?"

"Up at the north end of Bridlebit," said Cortland.

"What were you doing up there?"

"I sent him up there," said Forrest. "I told him—"

"I'm asking the questions, Bob," said Zimmerman, his voice still soft, and Forrest instantly subsided. Zimmerman's eyes stayed on Cortland. They were bright with a hard calculation, and they had as much warmth and feeling as a piece of granite.

"What were you doing up there, Cortland?" Zimmerman said again.

"Looking for strays."

"How was it that you found Woodward?"

"Vultures led me to him."

Zimmerman was quiet a moment, as if he were going over something in his mind. Those eyes were still grim and hostile as they regarded Cortland.

"You see anything, Cortland?" Zimmerman asked after the pause.

Something was troubling Cortland, and again he could not define what it was. He supposed that these were routine questions and that it was Zimmerman's job to ask them, but something about the sheriff's attitude filled Cortland with a sense of misgiving.

"I said, Did you see anything?" Zimmerman's voice was still soft, but now it seemed to have an edge to it.

"Such as what?" said Cortland.

"Did you see any tracks? Did you see anything that might tell us who shot Woodward?"

CORTLAND frowned a little as he strove to remember. "I recollect the tracks of three horses coming and going away from where Woodward was lying," he said slowly. "I didn't try to follow them, so I don't know where they went."

He hesitated, " . . . I got the idea that Woodward was dead before he got there, somehow."

"What do you mean by that?" said Zimmerman.

"He was shot and killed someplace else, and then he was hauled to Bridlebit and dumped."

Zimmerman's eyes slitted ever so slightly. "What makes you think that?"

"You can tell from Woodward's shirt that he bled a lot; yet there wasn't any blood on the ground. He must have stopped bleeding by the time he was dumped on Bridlebit."

Zimmerman was silent a while. Again he looked as if he were considering something carefully. His eyes still had not shifted from Cortland's face.

Zimmerman said, "Did you know Woodward?"

Cortland shook his head.

"Do you know where Woodward lived?" "I've never been off Bridlebit since I hired out here. I don't know where anybody lives in this country. I've only been here a few months."

"That's right, Al," said Bob Forrest. "Red never—"

"I heard what he said, Bob," said Zimmerman in his soft yet hard way. This time Forrest flushed and shifted either uneasily or angrily on his feet.

"Where are you from, Cortland?" said Zimmerman.

Cortland felt his heart quicken. The beat of it was a solid pound now. He tried to keep his voice calm and relaxed but he did not know how successful he was.

"Colorado," he said.

"What part of Colorado?"

"North of Denver."

"That covers a lot of territory," said Zimmerman.

"Colorado is a lot of territory," said Cortland, anger beginning to rise in him.

Zimmerman's jaw bulged as if he were making an effort to contain himself. "Just where in Colorado are you from, Cortland?"

Cortland took his time before answering. Then he said slowly, "We're talking about Woodward, Zimmerman, not about me. I don't have to tell you anything about myself."

Zimmerman's lips thinned in a display of anger. His eyes grew very bright, like the glittering of a knife-blade in the dazzling sun.

Bob Forrest said, "Take it easy, Al. Red is all right. I'll vouch for him."

Zimmerman's chest swelled as he drew a prodigious breath. Then he seemed to have himself in hand. "Did you know Cortland before you hired him, Bob?" asked Zimmerman, his gaze still on Cortland. Cortland held his breath, waiting for Forrest's reply.

"No," said Forrest.

"How do you know you can vouch for him then?"

"I know a good man when I see one," Forrest said quietly.

"All right," said Zimmerman. He turned and went out of the bunk house.

Forrest came over to Cortland and squeezed his shoulder. He said nothing. He just stood there a moment, his eyes meeting Cortland's, and turned away. His spurs made small, jingling noises as he went out the door.

Cortland lay there, listening to the wild thumping of his heart. Whitey Alderson began to snore, the sound seeming to fill the whole room. Cortland turned his head once and saw that Burt Marlow had quit playing solitaire. The man still sat at the table, and this time he made no attempt to look away as Cortland stared at him. Marlow's eyes seemed to glisten with wicked amusement, but Cortland thought that might be a trick of the lamplight. After a while, Cortland brought his head back and looked up at the ceiling.

That constricting pressure was still on his throat.

CHAPTER TWO

The Barrier Between

THE ensuing days brought no change. The feeling of uneasiness and impending evil seemed to heighten rather than diminish, and Red Cortland began to be exasperated with himself. He told himself he was being childish. He had allowed his imagination to run away, and it had built up something monstrous out of all proportion with reality.

It was time he snapped out of it, he told himself angrily. It was true that his past held nothing good, but that was behind him. He had a new life here. Only Bob Forrest knew about the old days in the Wind River country, and Forrest had already showed that he would keep that secret.

Still that unnerving portent of doom would not leave Cortland. He tried to rationalize it. He was leading a rather lonely existence here on Bridlebit. He spoke occasionally to Burt Marlow and not much more to Whitey Alderson. Even Bob Forrest did not fraternize too much with Cortland, but that was a good thing since too great a familiarity might indicate that the two had known each other in the past.

So, Cortland figured, it was this lonely and almost friendless atmosphere that prompted those feelings of apprehension and even dread. Once he became convinced that his past was a dead and secure secret, he would feel better.

Forrest usually assigned Cortland to work alone. Cortland rather welcomed this. He had no use whatsoever for Burt Marlow and did not particularly like Whitey Alderson. They were not the kind of men that Cortland would have hired had he owned a ranch, and this again set him to wondering about Bob Forrest and once again Cortland felt ashamed. Bob Forrest was his best friend. It was ingratitude to think such thoughts of him.

This day Cortland found a steer with a bad cut on the ankle. He roped the animal, doctored the slash, and turned the steer loose. The sun was bright and hot, and Cortland sat down in the shade of a cottonwood and built himself a smoke.

As he popped the cigarette in his mouth, he had a brief, sharp vision of Orrin Woodward lying dead with his face in the sand. Cortland swore in disgust. It was time he was forgetting about Woodward, he thought. The man was dead and buried now, and though the killer had not been found, Cortland had nothing to worry about. Sheriff Zimmerman had never been back, and apparently Cortland was in the clear. Still he could not help thinking that he was mixed up with Woodward. It was a feeling that Cortland could not shake.

He looked up once and saw a rider come over a rise and head toward him. Cortland's eyes narrowed, and, when he recognized the rider, the apprehension passed from him. The rider was a woman.

Cortland watched her ride up. Her name was Shelley Graham, and to all appearances she was Bob Forrest's girl. She came to Bridlebit quite often, and it was thus that Red Cortland had come to know her.

She reined in her paint and dismounted. Cortland watched as she walked up to him. She was tall and slim, and he considered her very attractive. She removed her hat, and her hair, tied at the nape of her neck with a bright red ribbon, had a blue-black sheen in the sun. Her face was tanned and against this the natural crimson of her lips stood out sharply. She had rather high cheekbones which produced a permanent squint to her brown eyes. She was wearing a loose red shirt that still could not conceal the fullness of her figure. The buckskin divided riding skirt fitted her hips snugly, and the silvered spurs on the heels of her boots sparkled brightly in the sun.

Cortland felt something stir in him as he watched her. Being a lonely man, he had his dreams, and of late she had a way of working into them. There were times when,

lying awake in his bunk, her image would come before his eyes, and he would have to remember who he was and what he had been and that she was his best friend's girl, and put her out of his thoughts. It never was easy, but he always managed.

She came up, fanning her face with her hat, and then she stopped and stared at him with her head cocked a little to one side. He said nothing. He just drew on his cigarette even though the taste was gone from it.

Finally she spoke. "Hello, Red," she said. She had a low, throaty voice that moved Cortland strangely. He wished she hadn't come, not here anyway.

He nodded a greeting but said nothing.

She kept staring at him with a frank appraisal and wonder. She was silent a moment and then she spoke again. "You're not very happy at Bridlebit, are you, Red?"

He felt some resentment that she should have discerned this. The way she was looking at him, he had the uncomfortable impression that she could read his innermost thoughts.

"What makes you think I'm not happy?" he said, the touch of a growl in his tone.

"I can tell," she said quietly. Her eyes kept studying him. They appeared cool and grave. "You really don't like Bridlebit, do you?"

He shrugged. "That has nothing to do with it. I've been in worse places." He meant it.

"Why do you stay on, then?" she asked.

He could not answer this. To do so, he would have to mention his past and Cortland was not telling that to anybody. So he sat there and stared at the ground and said nothing.

She came ahead until she stood directly in front of him. "You've got something on your mind," she said, her voice low and soft. "It's eating away in there and it's no good for you, Red. If you'd talk about it, you'd feel better."

He glanced up at her. She did not seem aloof any more. There was a warmth in her eyes that he had never seen there before, and he felt his heart quicken. Then he remembered who he was and who she was, and the brief gladness went out of him. He turned his eyes back to the ground while all the old unpleasantness returned to him.

"Please, Red," she said. "I don't like to see any one as lonely and as bitter as you. If you'd let me, I'd like to help."

He looked up again, his eyes narrowing slightly, suspicion rankling him. "Why?"

"I just want to help."

"You know nothing about me. Why do you want to help?"

She colored a little. "It's true I know very little about you, Red, but I know you're good. If I didn't know this in my heart, I wouldn't have come to you. You've never tried to be friendly with me, yet I always have the feeling you want to be. Why, Red?"

She could read him as plainly as a brand on a cow's flank, he thought, and this made him angry. Then he thought if she could read him that well she could also figure out his past and this made Cortland uneasy and angrier still.

"I've got my reasons," he said coldly.

"Don't be like this, Red!"

He was angry and hurt now. The more she stood there, the more he wanted her. She was beyond his reach, and it was this knowledge that tormented him. There were women he could have, but he wanted more. He wanted mostly understanding and companionship—things that Shelley Graham could give him, but there was too much between them.

He felt mean and ugly now. "I didn't ask you to come here. I didn't start talking about it."

"Oh, Red," she said, her eyes glistening, "don't be like this. You're not really hard. You're just putting this on to cover up the way you feel inside. What is it, Red? What is it on your mind?"

Resentment and that rankling suspicion came to him. "Why are you so interested in me? Why do you want to know so much about me?"

She dropped to her knees beside him and put both her hands on his arm. "Do you have to ask a thing like that, Red?" she whispered. "Don't you know why?"

She was there close to him, that was all his mind grasped at this instant. There was a sharp ache in his throat and he could hardly swallow, and in him he felt a rush of emotion. She was there, a good woman, the kind he could never have. This was the closest he could ever come to having one.

He forgot all else. He forgot the past and the stain on his record and the barrier between them. He reached for her, and she came willingly although a little tremblingly. Her lips were a little cool and shy at first, but then they were no more.

He held her hungrily, his mouth bruising hers, he held her with the tortured knowledge that probably he would never hold her again, and this took the sweetness out of it and left it a vapid and aching experience. But he would not let her go. This was the first and only time, and so he would not let her go, and then the voice came, soft, low, ironic.

"Having fun, Red?"

Cortland released her and jumped to his feet, his hand starting a pass at his gun. Then he saw who it was, and Cortland froze, stunned at first, and then the shame and humiliation began to come.

Bob Forrest sat there with his wrists crossed on his saddlehorn. He had come up quietly and Cortland had been so absorbed that he had not heard the man's horse. Now Forrest sat there, his stare fixed on Cortland.

Cortland said nothing. He attempted no explanation. There really was no explaining a thing like this. She was Forrest's girl, and Forrest was his best friend and so the whole thing was cheap and sordid. At the moment, Cortland felt as low and slimy as the belly of a snake.

Forrest's eyes never left Cortland's face. For a brief time they glittered with a pure and savage hatred, and then they seemed to film over, as if Forrest had himself in check, and almost serene again. Cortland thought he saw an amused brightness deep in them, as if Forrest were secretly laughing at him, but this might have been a trick of the sun. There was nothing for Forrest to laugh about.

Now Forest stirred in his kak. "Get on your horse, Shelley," he said.

The girl obeyed instantly. Her head was bowed, and her face was still crimson with shame. She did not glance once at Cortland. She mounted her paint and started off.

Forrest stared at Cortland a moment longer. That bright hostility flared once again in Forrest's eyes but was almost instantly gone. A corner of Forrest's mouth twitched, and he wheeled his roan and was gone after the girl.

Cortland watched them go. His heart was pounding hard. He was full of disgust with himself. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

The Crying Man

CORTLAND rode into Bridlebit early in the afternoon and went directly to the bunk house and packed his few belongings in his roll. He was just about to pick it up when a jingle of spurs told him someone was entering the place. Cortland looked up and saw Bob Forrest.

Forrest paused just inside the door. He stood on straddled legs with his hands on his hips. His face was hard and grave. His mouth was pinched in a little at the corners but there was no hostility in his glance. His eyes at this moment held a bright inscrutability.

"Going somewhere, Red?" he asked.

That sense of shame and remorse descended on Cortland again. He was angry with himself for what he had done. "I thought I'd ride on," he said.

"Why?"

Cortland could feel a flush creeping over his features and this made him still angrier. "You know why, Bob."

"If you mean what happened earlier today, I've already forgotten it," said Forrest.

That discomfiture would not leave Cortland. He said nothing. He picked up the roll and held it under his arm.

Forrest stood there unmoving. He was deliberately blocking the door. "I can tell you honestly, Red, that I didn't like it one little bit, but I'll also tell you that I understand how it was. You've been away from people, especially women, too long. Shelley's a pretty girl, and what you did was only natural. Besides, she was just as much to blame as you."

Forrest paused and drew a breath. Then he went on, "I want you to stay here, Red. If I didn't want you, I wouldn't have sent for you in the first place. What happened today doesn't change this one bit with me. I don't want you to get me wrong. I'm overlooking it this time but I won't overlook it again."

He smiled and his voice was almost pleading, "I want you here, Red. You've had a tough break and I'd like to get you straightened out. Stay on at Bridlebit but let me give you a bit of advice. Let yourself go. Instead of staying at the ranch, ride into town this Saturday night and have yourself a time. You'll find yourself feeling much better. Now, how about it? You putting that roll back or do I have to take it away from you? . . . . "

* * *

It was two days later that Cortland found the tracks. He was up at the north end of Bridlebit, almost at the spot where he had found Orrin Woodward, that he looked down and saw the markings made by about twenty head of cattle being driven toward the mountain.

That old uneasiness settled between Cortland's shoulder blades. The meaning of the tracks was portentous to him. It had been his way of life back when he had been dumb and foolish. He knew the sign of rustling when he saw it.

Heart beating at a quickened pace, he started his buckskin in pursuit of the tracks. They led beyond the boundary of Bridlebit and headed toward a maze of ravines and canyons.

Something kept gnawing at the edges of his mind, but he could not quite grasp what it was. All that he knew was that it portended him no good. He began feeling more and more uneasy as he followed the tracks. The land lay bleak and barren about him, and that helpless anger began to nag him again. He told himself it was silly for him to feel this way, as spooky as a wild colt corraled for the first time, but there appeared to be nothing he could do about it.

He followed the tracks until they petered out on hard, rocky ground. He scouted around, but he could pick up no more sign. It was as if the earth had swallowed those cows, leaving nothing but a mocking remembrance.

When he reported the loss to Bob Forrest, the Bridlebit owner was silent a while. He lifted a hand and caressed his mustache thoughtfully, a far-away look in his eyes. Finally he spoke.

"There's been talk of rustling going on the past two months, but I never put much stock in it. Now I know it's true. Well, we'll just have to keep our eyes open and see if we can't pick up those light-fingered buckos. . . ."

Cortland lay on his bunk, staring up at the ceiling. It was night outside. Cortland could see the solid black of it outside the window. That was all he was doing right now, just staring from the ceiling to the

window and back again, and thinking about all those disturbing things that had troubled him ever since he had come to Bridlebit.

Burt Marlow, as usual, sat at the table playing solitaire directly under the lantern that hung from a rafter. Again Cortland had the sensation of being furtively watched by Marlow, but every time Cortland looked at the man, Marlow appeared to be intently studying his cards. However, Cortland was positive of this secret surveillance and it was starting to get him. It was harder and harder for him to ignore it.

Whitey Alderson sat on the edge of his bunk. He was a short, middle-aged man with a round pot-belly and the pink-tinted face of a heavy drinker. His hair was all white and so were his eyebrows, and this whiteness, along with the redness of his face and the near-sighted peering of his watery eyes, almost gave him the appearance of an albino.

He had a bottle in his hand, and he was working on it industriously. This was the only thing Alderson did with vigor and concentration. He was not much good at anything else, and Cortland often wondered if it was pity or softness that made Bob Forrest keep Alderson on.

Alderson, too, was watching Cortland, but there was nothing furtive about his attention. Not even when he lifted the bottle to his mouth did he take his glance away. He just kept staring with a stupid, drunken fixity.

There was a sad look on Alderson's face. The more he stared at Cortland the sadder Alderson seemed to become. It was as if he were building up to a crying jag.

Finally, Alderson took a prodigious swallow, wheezed, and rose unsteadily to his feet. The distance he covered in reaching Cortland's bunk was twice that which the crow flies. He halted there and swayed backward so far that Cortland thought the man would crash to the floor, but Alderson recovered. He shoved the bottle out in the general direction of Cortland.

"Have a drink, Red," muttered Alderson.

Cortland shook his head. "I don't feel like one right now. Some other time, Whitey."

"Ain't you gonna drink with me?" Alderson whined like a small boy being refused a favor.

"I just don't feel like it, Whitey."

"I'm only trying to be sociable," Alderson pouted. He reeled and caught himself, and then he gave Cortland an elaborate wink. "I want to be your friend, Red. You sure could use one."

Cortland became aware that Burt Marlow was no longer pretending interest in his solitaire. He was staring frankly and attentively at Cortland and Alderson.

Alderson took another drink and belched. "Yes, sir, Red," he said, "you need a friend bad. It ain't good for a man to be alone. It ain't good for a man to drink alone. Me and you could be friends, Red, and I could tell you things."

"What kind of things, Whitey?"

"Important things. Very important things."

"Shut up, Whitey, and go to bed!" said Burt Marlow.

He had risen to his feet. Marlow's eyes glittered, and his mouth was tight with anger.

ALDERSON turned. It was quite a maneuver for him but he managed it, even though he almost pitched on his face. "I like Red," he said to Marlow. "He ain't hurt no one. He minds his own business and I like him. I don't see why—"

"Shut up, Whitey." The words were a venomous hiss.

Cortland sat up and swung his legs over the side of his bunk. His heart was pounding hard and fast. A nettled anger pawed at his brain.

"Let Whitey talk, Marlow," Cortland said softly.

"I ain't listening to no drunken claptrap," Marlow snarled.

"You can go outside if you don't want to listen."

Marlow's eyes were blazing. "I ain't going outside, and I ain't listening to no drunken foolishness. He makes me sick with his fool blabbering."

"Then just hold your fingers in your ears, Marlow," Cortland said dryly. "Go on and have your say, Whitey."

All this bickering back and forth had Alderson confused. He was in the middle of it, between Marlow and Cortland, and Alderson kept turning his head to look first at one and then at the other. His mouth moved now and then but no sounds emerged. Then he got the answer to his dilemma. He lifted the bottle and had a hefty drink.

"Speak your piece, Whitey," Cortland said.

"All right," said Marlow. His voice was taut with wrath. He stepped up to Alderson and lifted a hand and cupped Alderson's face in it. Marlow's fingers dug deeply into Alderson's cheeks as he tilted Alderson's head. The pressure of those fingers left white spots around them in the pinkness of Alderson's complexion.

"All right, Whitey," Marlow said again, speaking through his teeth. "Go on and talk. You hear me, Whitey? Look me in the eyes, Whitey, and listen to what I have to say. You can talk to Cortland all you want, Whitey. I won't stop you any more. You hear? Go on and have your palaver with Cortland!"

Marlow gave a final squeeze that ripped a small moan out of Alderson. Then Marlow gave a shove that turned Alderson's head half around and released his grip. Alderson stumbled and banged up against the table. The bottle dropped from his fingers, but it did not shatter. It lay on the floor, the whiskey making gurgling noises as it ran out.

Alderson got down on his knees and righted the bottle. He was crying. "I was just trying to be sociable," he mumbled, more to himself than any one else. "I feel sorry for Red. I don't hate him. I just like him, that's all."

He crawled on his hands and knees to his bunk and then dragged himself on his blankets. He was still crying, the tears channeling down his cheeks. He had another drink, but he kept on crying. He cried until he fell asleep.

Now there was only silence in the room. Marlow blew out the light and got in his bed. Cortland lay in the darkness, thinking. He could feel that invisible band throttling his neck. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

No Other Choice

THIS morning, the sense of misgiving was stronger than ever in Cortland. He had more than fancy to go on this day, he thought. He was up here again at the north end of Bridlebit on a job that in his estimation held an ugly and fearsome implication. He was looking for a man, and the more Cortland looked, the more he became convinced that the man was dead.

The man was Whitey Alderson. He had ridden out the previous morning and never come back. When he had not returned at evening, Bob Forrest had evinced little concern. Even this morning with Alderson's bunk unslept in, Forrest had not seemed too worried.

"Damn that Whitey," Forrest had said. "He's probably in town tying one on. One of these days I'm going to get fed up and tell him to sack his saddle. Of course, something might have happened to him, but I doubt it. Still, keep your eyes open when you ride out today, just in case. You cover the north half, Red, since you're more familiar with that part. You, Burt, take the south half. I'm riding into town for a look." Forrest had showed a rueful grin. "I'm the one who'll probably be coming back with Whitey."

At the time, Forrest's words had made sense. Cortland was fully aware of Whitey Alderson's fondness for drink. He tried reassuring himself that that was what had happened to Alderson, but the prompting would not take. As the morning wore on, Cortland became more and more uneasy.

He tried telling himself it was a good sign he had not found anything yet. Most likely he wouldn't find anything all day. He would ride in to Bridlebit that evening and find Whitey Alderson sleeping it off in the bunk house.

Then the buckskin topped a crest, and there below him he saw it.

On the instant, a panicked urge to flee overwhelmed him, but he got himself in hand and sat there, frozen in the saddle, watching the sight below. His heart pounded with sharp hammer strokes, and there seemed to be a ball of ice among his entrails.

Finally, he started the buckskin, and the horse moved at a walk down the slope. Whitey Alderson lay twisted on his side, one arm at a grotesque angle behind him. His head had dropped down until the cheek almost touched his shoulder. The mouth gaped as if still agonizingly straining for a breath that would never come. His wide eyes stared blankly up at Cortland.

Cortland dismounted. The muscles of his thighs were quivering, and there was a faint, sick sensation in his stomach. He stood there and stared at the dead man, appalled more by what this portended than by the sight itself.

Like Orrin Woodward, Whitey Alderson had been shot in the back. But unlike Woodward, Alderson still lay where he had fallen. The large pool of crusted blood underneath him attested to this.

Cortland considered it as calmly as he could. If he were to flee, he would be implicated in Alderson's death. He would have to do the same as with Woodward. Nothing had come of that and nothing would come of Alderson.

Nevertheless, that tightness about his throat made it hard for him to swallow. . . .

* * *

It was dark when Sheriff Al Zimmerman arrived at Bridlebit. Cortland was in the bunk house, sitting on the edge of his bed, when he heard the horses come up. Again there was the pause while Zimmerman and the others went to view Whitey Alderson who had been laid out in the saddle shed.

After a while, footsteps approached the open door of the bunk shack and Cortland's breath caught in his throat. Then he told himself he had nothing to fear and the tenseness passed but not the feeling of dread.

Zimmerman entered first followed by Bob Forrest and then Burt Marlow. Zimmerman looked very stern, but then he had given Cortland the impression before that this was his usual manner. Forrest's face was grave and hard. Marlow seemed amused by something. His mouth looked as if it were ready to smirk at any instant.

Zimmerman's narrowed eyes first took in Cortland's gunless waist and then Cortland's belt and gun hanging from a peg and finally Cortland's face. When Zimmerman's eyes settled there, it was with the impression that they would not shift for some time.

Zimmerman's lips barely moved when he spoke, but the words were distinct enough. "You're making a habit of finding dead men, Cortland."

Something in the manner of the three men made Cortland sorry now that he was not wearing his gun. All three of them were armed and Zimmerman and Marlow were openly hostile. Even Bob Forrest did not seem friendly.

Cortland's throat was dry. "Explain yourself, Zimmerman," he said.

"There's no need for explanations," Zimmerman said coldly. "You're under arrest."

Cortland's fingers dug into the rim of his bunk. He could see it now, the whole foul and monstrous design, he was seeing it now when it was too late. A feeling of futility swept over him and then was gone, and anger began to roil in him.

"What am I under arrest for?" he said. He was surprised at the quietness of his voice.

"For killing Orrin Woodward and Whitey Alderson."

Cortland's lips tightened. "What would I want to kill them for? I never even knew Woodward."

Zimmerman drew his gun. He did it slowly because there was no need for speed, and, when he had the .44 out, he just held it against his thigh. He did not have to point it. The bared six-shooter was menace enough.

"Ever since you hired out to Bridlebit, there's been rustling going on, Cortland. Woodward was a big loser, and Forrest tells me Bridlebit has lost some stock. Evidently, Woodward and Alderson caught you at work, and you killed them to shut them up."

Sweat popped out on Cortland's forehead but he was not at all warm. "Would I have brought these men in if I had killed them, Zimmerman?"

"That's where you were clever," admitted Zimmerman. "You figured that in bringing in the men you'd killed, you'd throw suspicion off yourself. It worked, too, so far as Woodward was concerned. But it didn't work twice."

Cortland looked about him. He glanced longingly at his belt and gun on the peg, and he was tempted to take the chance, but then common sense told him he could never beat Zimmerman's gun. "I tell you I'm innocent, Zimmerman," he said, his voice hoarse now. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"What did you do before you came to Bridlebit?" asked Zimmerman.

That clinched it, Cortland thought desperately. That was the last masterful stroke. Now he knew completely and conclusively how it had been. It was this that had troubled him all along. What made it so tragic and remorseful now was that he had sensed the evil of it all the while but had never been able to grasp the vile meaning of it. He could have wept he felt so helpless and lost.

"What were you before you came to Bridlebit?" Zimmerman asked again.

"I think I can clear that up," said Bob Forrest.

His face was hard and determined. His eyes bored at Cortland while he spoke. "I knew Cortland," Forrest went on. "We grew up together in the Wind River country. Red went bad and was sent to the pen for rustling. I always figured he got a bad break, and, when he'd served his time, I thought I'd give him a chance to go straight. I realize now I made a mistake."

He sighed. "I suspected something when he brought in Woodward, but he was my friend, and I still believed in him. Even when a bunch of my cows was run off, I told myself to give him one more chance. Now that Whitey is dead, I've got no other choice. Believe me, Al, I don't like doing this but I've got to do something before all of us are murdered. If you doubt my story, you can always check it."

With that, Forrest turned and walked out, head bowed as if in grief and disillusionment. The amusement was very bright and mocking in Burt Marlow's eyes. The gun in Zimmerman's hand rose now, and the big bore gaped at Cortland's stomach.

"It won't be the pen this time, Cortland," Zimmerman said coldly. "You'll hang."

Cortland sat there stunned, the whole thing seeming like an ugly dream to him. He could not believe that it was ended for him with such a cruel finality. But he had to accept the facts. There was no more hope for him. There was only despair.

The tightening pressure around his neck was very real now . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Escape

THE air was sweet and precious to Cortland. He knew this was because he would never enjoy it again. Even now there was no pleasure in it for him. He was on the way to the jail at the county seat and once he was locked in a cell he would leave it only for his trial and for his hanging. So he tried to savor the air as much as he could, but at best it was only bitter-sweet.

Zimmerman rode beside Cortland. It was morning and the sun was up, and it kept flashing off the star on Zimmerman's shirt. The sheriff's face was stern. Cortland doubted if the man ever cracked a smile. Zimmerman had not spoken a word since they left Bridlebit.

Cortland's wrists were manacled together. He had enough freedom to handle the lines, but that was all. He was as helpless as a dogie trussed up for branding.

Resentment and finally wrath rose in Cortland. He was no longer stunned by his predicament. He was only angry now for having allowed himself to be duped in this manner. He was angry most of all at his helplessness. The whole thing was being done with all the skill and casual indifference of a steer rounded up and shipped and delivered at the stockyards for slaughter.

Rage grew to the point where Cortland thought he could no longer contain it. He felt his whole body trembling with the fury of it, and he had to take several deep breaths before he could subdue it. Then his mind was sharp and calculating, and he made a decision.

It was really simple, Cortland thought. He had no alternative. If he submitted meekly, he would hang. If he resisted, he would be killed. In any event, there was only death in it for him, but it was the manner of dying that mattered now to Cortland.

He reined in the buckskin and Zimmerman reacted instantly. He pulled up his black and whirled him half around. Zimmerman's eyes slitted and his right hand rested on the handle of his gun. He looked uneasily at Cortland.

Cortland showed a thin, mirthless smile. "What you so jumpy about, Zimmerman?"

"Don't try to be funny," said Zimmerman. "Start moving, Cortland."

"I want a drink," said Cortland.

"You don't need a drink."

"I'll bet you don't even give your prisoners a last meal before you hang them," Cortland said with a sneer.

A flush mounted to Zimmerman's hard face. Anger lay bright in his eyes. "Don't go getting smart with me, Cortland! Is that clear?"

"I only asked you for a drink. What you scared of?"

This wounded the man's pride. "I'm not scared of the likes of you, Cortland," he growled.

"What you waiting for then? Hand over that canteen and I'll have my drink, and then we'll go on."

"All right," said Zimmerman, "but don't go getting ideas. It makes no difference to me whether I hang you or shoot you!"

Cortland kneed the buckskin over beside the black. Zimmerman removed the cap and handed the canteen to Cortland. Cortland took it in his manacled hands and for a moment threw a mocking look at Zimmerman. Zimmerman started to flush again, then controlled himself. The edges of his mouth turned white with anger.

Cortland did it with deliberate, needling slowness. He put the canteen to his lips and took a good mouthful of water. He rinsed his mouth carefully, and then he turned his head aside and spat out the water. He could feel the quick, frenzied beating of his heart.

He lifted the canteen and took another mouthful. He was aware of Zimmerman's wary, unwinking glance on him. Cortland

started to rinse his mouth again, looking all the while into Zimmerman's eyes, and then spat the water.

Zimmerman saw it come, and he tried to avert his head and draw his gun at the same time. But Cortland was already moving. The water splashed into Zimmerman's eyes, and he cursed feelingly. Cortland ducked, and he rammed his shoulder up against Zimmerman's arm, pinning it back for an instant, and in that brief moment Cortland's handcuffed hands yanked Zimmerman's gun from its holster. Cortland straightened in his kak, the barrel of the .44 pointing at Zimmerman's stomach.

"Get off your horse," said Cortland, his voice dripping ice.

Zimmerman stiffened in chagrin and rebellion. Then he got a good look of Cortland's face, and the sheriff slowly swung a leg over the cantle of his saddle and stepped down to the ground.

Cortland dismounted, too. He rammed the barrel of the .44 against Zimmerman's stomach and drew back the hammer to full cock and said, "Unlock these cuffs, Zimmerman. You can try something if you want to. Maybe you'll get away with it and then again maybe you won't . . ."

THE only thing on Cortland's mind now was to try to get out of this country. He had a debt to settle at Bridlebit, but he decided to pass it up. He had left Zimmerman afoot, and there was no telling how soon the sheriff would meet up with someone and spread the alarm. The most prudent thing, Cortland thought, was to flee the country.

He headed toward the mountain, intending to cross the pass to the other side and thus ride out of Zimmerman's jurisdiction. When Cortland got there at nightfall, however, he found the pass blocked off. Evidently, Zimmerman had reached the telegraph and spread the news of Cortland's escape.

There was nothing for Cortland to do but turn back. He felt whipped now. The whole country would be on the lookout for him. Zimmerman was relentless enough not to give up until he had recaptured Cortland.

His best bet was to stay up here in the foothills of the mountain range, Cortland decided. This was wild, rugged country with no habitations outside of a couple of isolated ranches. He should be able to hide out successfully for some time except that he had no food.

He spent a cold and miserable night. He was hungry, and he did not dare risk a fire until he was better acquainted with his surroundings. All he could do was huddle up in the shelter of a high rock and watch the sluggish passing of the lonely hours.

He slept only in fitful bursts. He would just start to drop off when some sound or intuition would bring him back to wakefulness, and he would lie there, tense and apprehensive, listening for a repetition of that which had startled him, but always it turned out to be only his imagination. The night seemed full of a thousand perils which tantalizingly and tormentingly never materialized.

Since he could not sleep he pondered his predicament. No matter which way he looked at it, there was nothing good or hopeful to see. Everywhere the brutal visage of death appeared. That was all the future held for him—death by hanging or death by a bullet. Even if by some miracle he should escape, he would still be an outlaw, and to Cortland, who hungered for companionship and tranquility, this was even worse than death.

After the passing of an eternity and the beginning of another one, dawn came. The phantasmal fears of the night were gone. Now came the more apparent and deadly risks of the day. Cortland climbed to high ground and carefully surveyed the land below him. All he saw were the patches of pines and junipers, the slant and curves of the hills, the open and barren places, but

not the hint of a living soul. Nothing moved.

He took a chance and shot a rabbit. Then he built a small fire down in a depression, hoping that not too much smoke would rise to give him away. He cooked the rabbit without salt and ate it. It was not very tasty, but it was better than nothing.

Then he began looking for a place in which to hole up. By the middle of the morning he had found it. It was a small box canyon tucked into the side of the mountain. The entrance was high-walled and narrow. By climbing to the top of this high palisade that formed one side of the canyon, he could see clearly for a long way.

Now he lay up there on his belly, relishing the warmth of the sun on his back and studying the land below him. Once far away he caught sight of a group of horsemen, but they were not headed toward him and soon they passed out of sight in some timber. Cortland just lay there and watched.

This was the place where he would die, he thought. The canyon held enough graze for the buckskin, and there was also a small spring that provided sufficient water. For food he would rely on small game. It was as good a place as he could have picked in which to die.

The thought of death no longer frightened him or made him sad. He rather looked forward to it, for it meant the termination of life that no longer held any joy or meaning. What made him angry and bitter was that he would have to die with his name and memory disgraced.

He did not attempt to apologize for any of the things he had done. In his past he had erred, but he had also made full payment for his erring. Nevertheless, it was this straying he had done in the past that now automatically made him guilty of things he had never done. It was this that hurt Cortland most of all. It was this that made these hours a torment for him.

Now he caught sight of a lone rider. Cortland's eyes narrowed as he watched the single horseman. Every rider that passed up here would be meant for him, he thought, and so he watched until his eyes ached. The rider came on, climbing all the while and apparently heading for the canyon.

Cortland had the .44 sixshooter he had taken from Zimmerman and also Zimmerman's Winchester. Cortland's hands tightened about the rifle as he watched the horseman come on. There seemed to be something familiar about the rider, but exactly what it was did not register on Cortland's mind.

The rider entered a clump of junipers and passed through the trees, and when he emerged, much closer, recognition came. The rider was Shelley Graham.

SHE was scanning the country as if looking for something. There was a mixture of emotions in Cortland as he watched her. He knew gladness and hope, but then he thought of the evil and disillusion he had found everywhere, and there remained only suspicion and skepticism in his heart.

Cortland gave another look about but saw no one else. So he climbed down from his post and stepped out through the entrance of the canyon. The girl was turning her paint away when Cortland stepped out.

"Looking for someone, Shelley?" he asked softly.

The girl whipped around in her saddle with a sharp gasp of surprise. When she saw who it was, she jumped to the ground and came running up to Cortland. She threw her arms out as if to embrace him, but she saw the look on his face, and she pulled up abruptly. There was some fear in her eyes as she stared at him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked suspiciously.

"I've come to help you."

He could not get over the feeling that there was more to this than was apparent. There had been so much disillusion for him since he had come to this country that Cortland could not believe in goodness any

more. He would never believe again.

She saw the look of skepticism and doubt on his face, and when he did not speak, she went on, "I've brought you some food and some shells and a blanket."

"Why?"

She was taken aback by the coldness in his voice and by the chill in his eyes. "I want to help you," she said through stiff, pale lips. "They've got you cut off up here. I figured you'd be without food and that you could use some cartridges, and so I'm here."

"Why?" he said again. He did not believe her. After what had happened to him, he could never again believe any one.

Her eyes moistened. "Can't you guess, Red? Can't you guess why I came to you that other time too?"

"No," he said coldly and angrily.

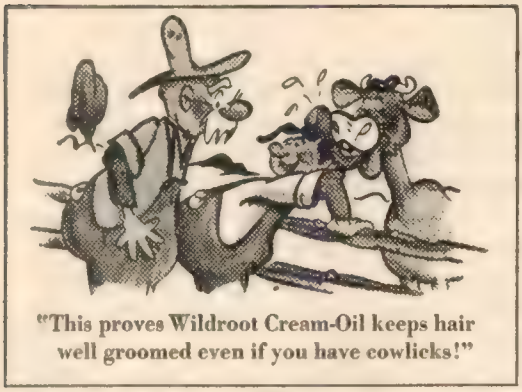
Tears appeared on the rims of her eyes, glistening there like tiny silvery globules. "All right," she said, a catch in her voice. "Maybe after you see what I've brought, you'll believe me."

She went over to her paint and began undoing the strings holding a roll to the cantle. Cortland's heart was pounding hard. Something prescient was tickling the back of his neck, there was the feel of ice in his entrails.

While the girl worked at the strings, Cortland started to give a careful look around. He had his back to her when the glint of the sun on something attracted him. He glanced sharply to the right, and there he saw Burt Marlow.

The man had come up surreptitiously through the clump of junipers, apparently in the girl's wake. Now he lay flat on a rock, one elbow propped up as he aimed his carbine at Cortland. Cortland saw the wicked flashing of the sun, and, even as he brought his own Winchester up and lunged to the side, Marlow's gun roared.

Cortland's sudden movement saved him.



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He felt the sting of the bullet as it seared the side of his neck, and he knew that, if he had not gone down to the side, the slug would have smashed him in the heart. He had his own sights set now, and he squeezed the trigger.

The slug seemed to lift Marlow bodily up off the rock. He screamed and gave a convulsive twist completely around while still in the air and he came down, hitting the rock on the side and bouncing down to the ground. The carbine had flown from his fingers and came down on the opposite side of the boulder. Marlow lay very still.

Rage roiled in Cortland. He could hardly see from the force of his wrath. All that his mind held was the galling and maddening taste of deceit and treachery. Everywhere he went, that was all he encountered.

"Damn you," he shouted at the girl, his face livid, the cords standing out in his neck. "Even you. Even you've turned against me. You're rotten just like the rest of them. If you weren't a woman, I'd kill you, too. Maybe I'll kill you anyhow!"

He was only dimly aware of having worked the lever of the Winchester. All that his mind grasped was the fact that she had betrayed him and that there was a fresh shell in the breech and that he had just to press the trigger. Madness shrieked in him, madness and hate and hurt. He felt his finger curling around the trigger, he felt it begin to squeeze, and then he saw what had been in her hands.

His fury had filled her with dismay and fear, and the roll had fallen from her hands as she stood there transfixed, horror-filled eyes wide as they stared at him. In falling, the roll had come open, scattering the contents, and Cortland saw what they were. There was a slab of bacon and some dried beans and flour and coffee and salt. There was also a box of .44 shells.

Contrition hit Cortland, and mortification and shame. He was so wrapped up in his bitterness that he believed in nothing any more, not even those who genuinely tried to help him. He was ready to hurt and kill those who would help him, and this realization made him sick with disgust and hatred for himself.

"Shelley," he whispered, appalled at what he had almost done. The rifle felt heavy and unclean in his hands. "I didn't know, Shelley."

She came out of her fear and paralysis. She moved up to him, her eyes wet again. "Please, Red," she said, lifting beseeching hands. "Instead of hating everybody and fighting everybody, why don't you try to fight for yourself? There's really nothing else for you to do. You can't go on fighting everybody blindly. There can be only one ending to that. Why don't you fight for yourself for a chance? . . ."

CHAPTER SIX

The Proof

BURT MARLOW lay where he had fallen. His eyes were closed, and his face held the grayness of death, but his chest still rose and fell. The bullet had ripped down through his body, and he was bleeding heavily and Cortland knew that only death would staunch that flow.

As Cortland stared down at the dying man, Marlow's eyes fluttered and opened. For a while, they stared straight upward with a blankness that saw nothing. Then their focus changed, and they looked directly at Cortland but the blankness was still in them and Cortland did not know if they could make him out.

There was a plan in Cortland's mind, but it depended on Marlow's living a while longer and understanding. Without this, the plan was no good. Cortland could feel his throat constrict. His heart was hammering wildly.

He dropped to his knees beside the dying man. "Marlow," he called. "Can you hear me, Marlow?"

For a moment more Marlow's eyes re-

mained blank. Then a lucidity crept into them and they grew bright with a futile hate. "Damn you, Cortland," Marlow whispered. "I'll kill you yet. Give me a gun and I'll kill you."

"You aren't killing any one any more," Cortland said coldly.

"I'll kill you," said Marlow, his lips twitching spasmodically, his eyes glazed with delirium. "I'll kill you, I'll kill you."

"Listen to me, Marlow," Cortland said, his voice hard and unrelenting. "It's not me you should kill. It's the one who sent you to your death. Don't you want to square with him, Marlow?"

"Damn you," said Marlow. "I'll kill you."

"Get that out of your head," Cortland said brutally. He knew no pity for the man. "You know you're dying, don't you? Well, then, listen to me. I'll tell you how you can square for yourself."

He paused and drew a breath. His heart was racing, his very life depended on what he was doing now. He went on, "I'll tell you how it was, Marlow, just so you won't think I'm kidding you. Woodward wasn't killed on Bridlebit. He was hauled there so I would find him and that would be the beginning of the frameup. Bridlebit's cows were run off to throw suspicion from you and also to let me find the tracks and fit the frame a little bit tighter around me. Whitey Alderson was in it, but he didn't have the stomach for it. He wanted to tip me off, and so he was killed and I was sent to find him dead, too. This along with my past was enough to throw all the guilt on me and let every one else go free. Isn't that right?"

"Go to hell, Cortland," Marlow said.

"That's where you'll soon be, Marlow," said Cortland. "Don't you want to get even with the man who's sending you there?"

Sweat lay on Marlow's forehead. A look of panic flickered in his eyes as if he were now seeing the inexorable approach of death but he was still defiant. "The hell with you," he whispered.

"Look at it this way, Marlow," Cortland said, his voice edged with desperation. "He double-crossed everybody, didn't he? He double-crossed and framed me. He got you to kill Whitey. Then he sent you up here after me, and you're dying because of that. Where does that leave him? He's in the clear, and he has all the profits of the rustling. He doesn't have to split with anybody any more. Don't you see it, Marlow?

"You're going to be dead soon, Marlow. Do you think he'll cry because of that? He'll laugh, Marlow. While you're rotting in your grave, he'll be living high on the money you helped him make and laughing at the sucker he made out of you. But you can get even with him, Marlow. You can square yourself with him. Don't you want me to tell you how, Marlow?"

Marlow's eyes were wide and distended with the fear of death. A sob racked him. "How can I square with him? I'm dying, damn you, dying. How can I get a gun to him?"

"You don't need a gun," said Cortland, his heart beating hard. This was the crux of it, he thought, this was where it was decided whether he lived or died. "I've got a tally book in my hand, Marlow, and I've got it written out like I told it to you. All you have to do is sign your name, and you'll put a noose around his neck. Isn't that enough for you, Marlow?"

Marlow lay there, considering it. His chest rose and fell, swifter now as if each inhalation could not draw in enough breath. His eyes stared past Cortland into the great, unfathomable distances, and Marlow must have seen the face of death there, for a sudden panic convulsed him. His hands reached desperately.

"I ain't dying alone," he gasped. "I'm taking him with me. Give me the damn pencil, Cortland. . . ."

CORTLAND waited. There was nothing else for him to do. He had sent Shelley Graham away with the tally book

containing Burt Marlow's signed confession. Cortland had instructed the girl to turn the book over to Zimmerman. Cortland would have done this himself, but he was still not over his distrust of people. There was the possibility that he might be shot on sight before he could deliver the book, and there was also the possibility that the confession would not be believed. So Red Cortland took no chances.

He lay up on the palisade, waiting for that which his intuition told him would come.

It was late in the afternoon when Cortland finally saw it. His heart gave an exultant leap and then he was cold and raging inside. He saw first the lone horseman, spurring his horse desperately as he headed up the foothills toward the mountain. A while later Cortland saw a party of five riders, obviously in pursuit of the first.

Cortland waited no more. He scrambled down the palisade and ran to his buckskin and saddle it. He went out of the canyon at a hard run.

He drove the buckskin recklessly and mercilessly. There was only one thought in Red Cortland's mind now. He was obsessed with its insistent fury. He could think of nothing but how he had been duped and abused. He almost wept his wrath was so great.

The buckskin crashed through a clump of junipers and burst into open ground and there Cortland saw the other. He was so intent on eluding the ones behind him that he was not aware of Cortland until the buckskin had been pulled to a sliding halt. The man's head turned, and a vehement curse ripped out as he spied Cortland.

The man was Bob Forrest.

Forrest reined in his roan with a cruel twist of the bit. The roan was spent and the abrupt halt almost sent it to its knees, but it struggled up and stood there on spraddled, trembling legs, its lathered flanks heaving and its tortured breath whistling through its mouth.

Sweat was dripping down Forrest's drawn face; sweat made dark blotches under his armpits and in the small of his back. His eyes were wild and frantic; they held the look of an animal at bay. There was a bullet hole in one of his sleeves and the cloth was soiled with blood. Evidently, he had shot his way out of something.

Cortland could not contain his angry exultation. "How do you like it, Bob?" he shouted. "Is that Zimmerman after you? Is he riding to catch you and hang you? Are you going to fill the noose you'd prepared for me? How does it feel to be on the receiving end of it for once?"

Forrest's teeth showed in a ferine snarl. "I might hang, Red," he cried, "but you won't be around to see it!"

With that, Forrest went for his gun.

Cortland drew and fired. He heard the roar of Forrest's weapon, but it was a distinct echo to his own, and the barrel of Forrest's gun was already tilting at the sky. Cortland fired again, and Forrest screamed and doubled up. For an instant he was huddled there, like a small boy hugging himself against a bitter cold, then with a grimacing effort Forrest straightened and started to bring his gun up again. Cortland fired once more. This slug passed into Bob Forrest's straining, snarling mouth, and smashed up into his brain. The roan gave a sudden lunge now that the grip on the lines slackened, and Forrest pitched headlong out of the saddle. He was dead before he hit the ground . . .

Sheriff Al Zimmerman was one of the five who presently rode up. The cavalcade pulled up abruptly when they spied the dead body of Bob Forrest. Cortland watched them with slitted eyes. He had reloaded his gun and now he held it in his hand. He still was not trusting any one.

Zimmerman saw this and flushed with embarrassment. "I want you to know I'm sorry, Cortland," he said gruffly. "Under the circumstances I couldn't do otherwise. I'd like to make it up to you if I can."

"Forget it," Cortland said curtly. "Am I clear now?"

"You're clear," said Zimmerman.

Cortland holstered his gun and turned the buckskin. He had just touched it with the spurs when he heard the sound of a running horse behind him and then someone called his name. The voice was that of Shelley Graham.

She reined in her paint beside him. Her eyes kept throwing quick, anxious glances at him. "Where are you going, Red?" she asked.

He shrugged. "The other side of the mountain. Anywhere so it's away from here."

"Why?"

He laid a direct and steady look on her. "There's nothing for me around here," he said quietly.

"Are you sure?" she said, coloring a little. "Why don't you use your eyes a little bit better?"

She reached out and caught the bridle, halting the horse. Her face looked a little angry. "Why do you have to be so sensitive?" she asked. "You've paid for the mistakes you made. It isn't what you were in the past that counts, Red, it's what you are right now. Everybody knows you for what you really are around here. If you keep drifting you'll only go to where your past might be held against you. Can't you see that?"

Her eyes moistened and her lips trembled. "Please, Red. Have you ever had any doubts how I feel about you? Why do you think I came to you that first time? Why do you think I helped you today? If I had loved Bob Forrest more, I never would have turned Marlow's confession over to Zimmerman. What more proof do you need of how much I love you?"

"Then you don't want me to leave?" he said.

"Never, my darling, never . . ." ● ● ●

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By
AL STORM

"I warned you, Sid!" Parrish screeched. "I warned—"

BLOOD ON THE TETON RIM

When Ike Parish rode shotgun on the Holiday treasure stage, his owlhoot pardners figured they had a golden fortune already in their hands. . . .

SID LUCKWELL toyed with his drink, holding his voice carefuly below the booming confusion of the Stirrup's crowd. He did not look at Parish.

"Then you're going through with it?"

Ike Parish nodded. When he saw that Luckwell was staring blankly at the half-

empty shot glass, he said, "On the level. I'm drawing their pay, I'm guarding their coaches. That's why I'm telling you, Sid. The tie-in like we planned at Ashby is off now. I'm playing this one straight."

"A woman," Luckell mused bitingly. "A damned soft-eyed—"

"Easy, Sid!"

Anger lifted Sid Luckwell's lithe shoulders. He clicked the whiskey glass against the bar top and turned. "Sorry, Ike." Despite the sharp flow of anger, his voice was soft. "I had no call to bring Havely's daughter into this."

For a moment, neither man spoke and the smoking hilarity of the mining camp saloon broke sonorously against their sobriety. Ike Parish shifted as Bull Auger crowded against him, trying to get to the congested bar. Somewhere beyond the scuffing boots and droning talk a stringed band was making dance music.

He could feel Bull Auger's reddish eyes measuring him over his shoulders.

"Well," Luckwell said briefly, "We'll see how she rides. Maybe a few long hauls with rain and sleet plastering your ribs and you'll change your tune."

Parish forced a grin. "Could be, Sid."

But he wouldn't, he knew; and he sensed that Luckwell also realized this was the end of it. The partnership formed at Ashby—when every stage was filled to window level with raw dust and a man needed only a gun, a horse, and a stroke of luck to make himself a fortune—was breaking. They'd formed the nucleus of a gang, dreaming of a quick stake to build themselves a cattle ranch somewhere southward. But the placers had petered out before they'd made a move. Then came news of the big new strike at Teton Rim along the lower fringe of the Bitterroots . . .

"Luck, Sid." Ike Parish turned away, shoving clear of the bar crowd.

"No you don't, Parish!" Bull Auger's rasping growl stopped him. "You ain't droppin' us now just 'cause you got a skirt lined up. We been workin' this deal out and—"

Parrish twisted, seeing Auger's thick body moving out from the bar. Men melted away before the intensity of Auger's anger, making a cleared place.

"Shut up, Auger!" Parish snapped. "This is no place—"

"It's not me that needs shutting," Auger persisted. "I ain't the one that's quitting. I ain't the one that's lolly-gaggin' around old man Havely's girl, maybe tellin' her—"

Parish felt the blood drain from his face. Auger was drunk, drunker than he had suspected. Drunk enough not to watch his words. Another half a minute and he'd spill . . .

"Keep clear, Auger," he said thinly. "You know me well enough to know I . . . Damn it! Stay back!"

But Bull Auger's thick frame kept edging closer, kept pushing into the narrowing interval between them.

"You got that job like we planned, and now you're double-cross—" Bull Auger's red hand stabbed downward without warning. and lifted the heavy revolver.

Ike Parish shifted his own weight as he matched the draw. His Colt lifted, hammer back—but Sid Luckwell had come in from the side. His gun barrel splatted against the side of Auger's head. Auger choked and went down.

"Get out, damn you, Parish!" Luckwell spat. "Maybe Auger's right. Maybe I ought to finish what he started. Get out."

The fight was over. A few men stood peering curiously at the pair of tall, lithe-shouldered strangers; but the siren lure of liquor and gaming and coaxing women swivelled their attention. Ike Parish turned away, gun still naked in his fist, and pushed through the crowd toward the door.

OUTSIDE, he stood for a moment in the ruddy glare of the oil torches that framed the Stirrup's ten foot entrance. Stars were agleam somewhere overhead,

but the garish lights, the smoke and haze of three thousand avidly working gold-seekers masked them. Men jostled him, pushing into the saloon. Snatches of talk and bits of laughter touched him, and he turned up the slope toward the Havely Stage and Freight Line.

Luckwell would play it through, he knew. Make his stake and disappear, maybe even taking Bull Auger in with him in buying that ranch. Parish swore gruffly, half regretting the decision that had cut him away from that dream. A drunk crowded into him, and Parish used the flat of his hands to shove the man staggering off the walk.

Old Man Havely was standing in the doorway, his round flushed face showing awed amazement as he stared along the thronged streets of Teton Rim.

"Six months ago, the four Saunders brothers and Hank Blevins—now . . ."

Parish nodded, turning to study the long row of reddish lights that flooded the gulch before petering into seeming endless ravels of tiny individual fires.

"Like Ashby, only bigger," he said.

Old Havely turned. "You was at Ashby?"

Parish cursed inwardly for the slip. "Saw it passin' through," he said. "Loud and rough and rich. And now—nothing."

He stepped past Havely before the old man could answer and crossed the square clapboard room with its hand-printed stage schedules tacked between the windows. Peg Havely looked up from the corner desk where she was working. Her smile softened Parish, and he knew that he was grinning like a school kid.

"Ready for the new job, Mr. Parish?" she asked.

He nodded, watching the soft pulsation of her throat. A deep color began flushing her throat, and he realized that he had been staring. Her eyes held a strange soft questioning as he turned abruptly away.

His glance shifted over the pair of shotgun guards lounging across the room. Two more were somewhere to the rear, he knew. For dust was funneling an ever richer stream into Havely's keeping for transshipment outside. Luckwell had learned that, within forty-eight hours after arrival in Teton Rim. And what Luckwell had learned, probably half a thousand renegades already knew.

"Funny, you takin' a low pay job like this," old man Havely mused. "Most young bucks are after gold, either with pick and shovel or with a gun . . ."

A party of horsemen raised dust along the street, and Havely broke off, watching them. Parish moved to the door, not liking this turn of speculation. A pedestrian swore angrily as the horsemen crowded him aside, and then they were gone, swallowed in the incessant workings of people across the street.

The stage came around the corner, side lights burning, and Parish stepped out before Havely could wonder further. A gaunt yellow-mustached driver watched as he climbed the wheel and settled himself on the high seat.

"Shoot first," old Havely called. "Luck."

The Whip shook out his reins with a raucous yell and the stage leaped ahead. Parish sat stiffly, conscious of his utter vulnerability as he sat the high box. The shotgun was reassuringly heavy, and he hefted it, wondering if Sid Luckwell, or Bull Auger. . . .

"She'll rare, Mister," the Whip said gruffly. "If you're still alive when time comes to use it."

Parish started to grin, twisting to spit over the side. A face leaped at him from the crowded walk. Bull Auger's face. He stared, seeing Bull Auger half lift the six-gun at his thigh, then slide it gently back into leather. The Whip's strident scream lifted the stage into faster running and they rolled on down the street.

* * *

The gulch narrowed. Stone walls lifted higher, shut out the star glow, leaving only

a twisting narrow ribbon of light far overhead. Shod hooves and steel wheel rims picked a thunder from the silence and sent it smashing against the darkness. Echoes rolled back across them.

"Got to bull it," the Whip said grimly. "Can't sneak, can't cut across. Just got to bull through and hope to hell nobody's sittin' up ahead with a Winchester."

Parish didn't answer. For a time vigilance kept him on edge. The Whip dozed, driving by sheer instinct. The night deepened, faded into a cold grayish haze. They stopped at Cold Water for a change of teams, took on coffee and flapjacks, and then went on.

Near mid-afternoon they topped a rise to see Holiday where a blue-water stream twisted back on itself.

"A smart man might call it quits here," the Whip said dourly. "There's a stage headed on west."

Parish jerked alert, twisting to peer at the leathery-jawed, pinpoint-eyed old driver.

"Havely's a friend," the Whip went on. "Peg's like my own Sarah, and . . . Damn it! I was in the Stirrup when you an' Bull Auger tangled. I heared enough about Auger to know why he's in Teton Rim, and when he bellers about you double-crossin'—"

"Maybe you hear too much, friend," Parish whispered tautly.

The Whip spat into the dry sand of the roadside. "Shoot, ye damned sidewinder," he snarled, glaring across the edge of his shoulder at the shotgun in Parish' hands. "Shoot! Ye can head back into Teton Rim with the story that some renegade popped up out of the rocks and cut me down. Havely'd believe you. He'd trust you enough so's you can knife him in the back. Go ahead, shoot."

"Got me all figured out, haven't you?" Parish clipped. "Just a two-bit skunk with a taste for gold." He glared at the driver, his own anger heating his face. "Get along into Holiday, Mister. We got a long ride home yet."

"I'm warnin' ye—"

"I been warned before," Parish said flatly. "Now, prod those damned nags into town!"

EIGHT men and three women were booked to ride the stage back to the eldorado of Teton Rim. Parish loafed after an eight-hour rest, watching the stage ready for the return run. Men crowded in, anxious for the latest word from Teton Rim, expectancy open in their voices.

"Richer by the hour," the Whip repeated dourly. "Gold by the ton just waitin' for somebody to pack it off." He canted an eye at Ike Parish, adding wickedly, "And half a thousand outlaws just waitin' for you to pick it up so's they can split your skull for it."

Parish pinched his lips against the hot retort that burned his throat. He was a fool, ten kinds of a damned fool, for sticking with the job. But somehow he couldn't trace a future beyond memory of a certain pair of haunting blue eyes, couldn't follow a pattern that wasn't shaped by what she expected of a man.

They pulled out with night dark across the lowlands. The Bitterroots hulked black and lumpy against the silvered sky, far distant, remote, a part of another world.

At Cold Water they stopped, then went on, coming into the spruce-bracketed badlands of canyon rocks and treacherously narrow roadway.

Parish hunched over the shotgun, muscles knotted in against the chill wind. The Whip slouched against his own side of the seat, saying nothing, waiting openly for the shotgun guard's move.

They wheeled up a small hummock and dropped down, curling along the flank of a high lifting ridge of naked granite. The leaders veered inward suddenly, dragging the next team. The Whip swore aloud and braced against the reins. Parish stiffened.

A rope had been stretched across the road, slanted so that the stage teams would be shunted in against the bank. He saw it at a glance and half lifted the shotgun.

"Don't try it!" a voice warned tersely from the higher rocks. "Just let it drop!"

For half a second he hesitated, finger taut against the cool steel of the trigger. Another voice called out. They were hidden behind boulders, giving no target. And yet, at this first testing—

"Drop it, ye damned fool!" the Whip rasped. "Your friends might . . ."

Reluctantly, Parish lowered the shotgun and raised his hands.

"Now, get down," the voice called. "Clean the coach and leave the stuff in your hat in the middle of the road where we can see it."

Fuming in his helplessness, Parish climbed down to the road. The Whip was watching him knowingly, and he swore aloud. Wallets, three watches, some loose money he crammed in the crown of his sombrero.

"Now untie that rope!"

The open mockery of the voice cut like a lash. He knew that Sid Luckwell was silently laughing, enjoying his discomfiture. And the knowledge curdled anger within him.

"Drive on, driver," the bandit ordered. "Leave Parish stand."

The Whip yelled at his teams and the stage began rolling. Parish stood back, conscious of the wondering stares of the passengers. Then the stage was gone, the Whip's yell rising shrill above the pound of shod hooves and the whine of steel rims.

"All right, Sid," he called thinly. "You started the play. Come out in the open and finish it."

There was no answer. Time stretched away into the silence of the naked rock. Parish swore. He strode back and dumped the haul from his hat, defiantly slamming the sombrero atop his head. No challenge came, and he realized that he was alone in the canyon. Luckwell had had his joke and had gone.

Night was far gone when he limped along the street of Teton Rim. Lights still showed in a dozen or so places, but the street was deserted. He was footsore, fagged, and anger made a hard cold knot across his midriff that no amount of swearing would dissolve.

Havely's was barred, but light showed at the window, and he pounded on the door. When it came open, he pushed in, ignoring the shotgun muzzle that gaped in front of him.

"Here's your damned stuff," he rasped. Tell the passengers they can claim it in the morning."

Old Havely nodded, watching him uncertainly. A squat, thick-chested man got to his feet. Lamplight picked a gleam from the badge pinned to his vest.

"Ed Carroll told us," the lawman said. "Only he maybe had it a little twisted. They weren't friends of yours?"

Parish rocked on his heels, raw nerved with the anger that lashed him.

"Maybe I recognized a voice or two," he said bleakly. "Maybe not. It don't matter. I brought the stuff in. And I'm still riding shotgun if I ain't fired."

The lawman eyed him searchingly, feeling the biting intensity of his emotions; but he made no comment.

"Rest up, Parish," old Havely said. "We'll have—" He stopped, flicking a side glance at the lawman. "Rest up, Parish."

Parish nodded and turned toward the door. Graying smudge was marking the east. He'd been a day and a night without sleep, and now fatigue was softening the bones that supported him.

"I'd like—" he began.

His eye caught motion along the far side of the street and he watched mechanically, recognized the figure turning in at the Chink's, and his jaw locked.

He crossed the street, conscious that the lawman had stepped to the door and was

watching after him. At the Chink's he stopped. The lawman closed Havely's door. Farther on down the street a man lifted his voice in drunken song.

Sid Luckwell was at a table, stirring coffee. He looked up as Parish approached, and a wide grin twisted his mouth.

"Morning, Ike," he said. "How's the guard business?"

Parish flipped the edge of his palm against the cup, tilting the hot fluid into Luckwell's lap. Luckwell came to his feet, his face changing.

"This isn't a joke, Luckwell," Parish said thinly. "Maybe you had your fun. But another deal like this one—"

Light glinted from the ice slivers that were Luckwell's narrowed eyes. "You poor damned fool! I was trying to warn you. You suppose—because it's you on the box. . . . A rifle slug could mince your lungs before you even knew anybody was around. I'm trying to make it easy for you. But if you won't listen—"

Parish canted his head, shooting his glance along the scattered occupants of the room. "I won't listen," he said flatly. "You can get your stake. Get it and get out of Teton Rim. But don't try for any stage that I'm riding!"

"Or what, Parish?" Luckwell's fingers hitched slowly toward his thigh. He was fast, faster than Ike Parish; and both of them knew it. "What'll happen if we do?"

Parish didn't answer. Somewhere along the line, Luckwell had changed. It wasn't just stake for a cattle ranch that prompted him. He was . . .

"A damned chit of a girl," Luckwell raged. "We had it all laid out. You were lined up to make yourself a killing. And then you let . . ."

Parish stepped in, seeing Luckwell duck and start his draw. But the first move had been Parish's, and he followed it through, lifting his fist with his shoulder behind it. Luckwell's head rocked back. His lips were shredded, beginning to gush blood.

Still raging, Parish followed, sledging his left, and then his right, stopping only when he realized that with his first blow Luckwell had been out.

The Chink's was frozen quiet. He whirled, dropping his hand gunward. They watched but none made a move to interfere. Parish crossed to the door, keeping watch upon them. Once through the door he stepped aside and waited a long minute. Nobody followed.

HE HAD broken it, he knew. Luckwell would be after him now, hot and heavy. A chill realization coasted across his back that he was marked, and sooner or later . . . Turning, he made his way back to Havely's, going along the outside until he came to the gate at the rear.

"I'll sleep in the loft," he told the belligerent guard who blocked his way. "Havely'll vouch for me."

The guard plainly didn't like it.

"Somebody gunnin' for you?" he queried.

Parrish nodded, nettled that he showed his unease so plainly. He hadn't wanted to face it, but the fact couldn't be denied. He would be gunned down now. Knowing what he did of Luckwell's plans, able to name every man of the gang who had drifted in from Ashby, he was a menace to Luckwell, to Auger, to every man-jack one of them.

He climbed the stubby ladder to the loft, wondering just what had happened to put him under the gangs' guns. Was it the girl, Peg Havely, or was she merely the starting of it? Maybe an innate stubbornness marked the clash between him and Luckwell and the girl meant nothing. But he couldn't imagine that. Peg Havely was an important point in his reckoning now.

He drifted to sleep with the thought in his mind.

Pale daylight was in the loft when he roused. Below, the sound of excited talk caught his attention. He stretched briefly and climbed down the ladder.

"What's up?" he queried.

A man looked at him, then jerked his head toward the front office. Parish turned, unconsciously hurrying his steps. Something had happened. A perceptible tension gripped Havely's men.

A small crowd was gathered before the door. He saw a stage coach pulled up, saw the lawman talking to a tall, skinny redhead whose shirt front was sopped with blood.

"No warnin'," the redhead sobbed. "Just cut loose an' butchered Cuss Saunders the first blast."

Parish shoved his way through the crowd. Peg Havely was there, her face pale stamped with anger, and old man Havely, Sid Luckwell. The sight of Luckwell in the line of onlookers stopped Parish dead. His fingers slid gunward. Luckwell's glance touched him, paused, and slid away without recognition.

"But I'd know one of 'em," the redhead was babbling. "Saw his left hand and it had only three fingers. I've seen a hand like that afore in this camp. I—" The redhead sagged into the lawman's arms.

Parish squirmed, trying to locate Luckwell. Three fingers on a left hand—that would be Luke Benoight. Shooting without warning—Benoight, Bull Auger, maybe Cotton Wolfe and. . . . He saw Luckwell a score of yards down the street, walking fast.

Swearing under his breath, Parish shouldered at the packed crowd, worming his way into the clear. He heard Peg Havely call his name, but he didn't turn.

"Hey, Parish," a man took it up.

Luckwell was turning into the Stirrup. He began running.

They were at the bar—Auger, Luckwell, and Luke Benoight. He wheeled warily as he shouldered in.

"Well," Auger taunted. "Here's little Bo Peep come to warn us nasty men—"

Parish ignored him, shaking off the fight Auger was trying to force on him.

"Sid! For God's sake—"

Luckwell twisted, and Parish saw that he had been holding a gun close beside him. The muzzle lifted: Ice was in Luckwell's eyes, ice and the hot avid shine of a ravening wolf.

"Don't raise 'em," Luckwell whispered. "Just stand, Parish. Get his gun, somebody."

Luke Benoight sidled around to reach for the holstered gun. The batwing doors parted, and Parish caught the swift change of expression on Luckwell's face. He twisted.

Peg Havely stood at the door. Then, face whitening, she whirled and was gone.

"Luke, you blistering damned fool!" Luckwell raged. "Keep your crippled hand—"

Parish saw that Benoight had reached for his gun with the disfigured left hand. Undoubtedly, Peg Havely had seen it, was even now . . .

"Out the backway—quick," Luckwell snapped. "Maybe we can make a run for it."

Auger and Benoight turned. Parish kicked out savagely, trying to catch Luckwell. His boot toe caught Luckwell under the kneecap. Luckwell's revolver bellowed. But Parish had flung himself aside. Now he vaulted the bar, dropping to all fours, and scuttled desperately back under the overhang.

He heard the clatter of running feet, the loud swearing of the barkeep at the far end. A door slammed.

"What in hell—" A big Irish barkeep came along the bar, his beefy fist knotted around a bung starter.

Parish got to his feet and got back on the customer side of the mahogany. He stepped to the door and started out. The lawman was there, backed by two strangers. All had guns, and in their hands.

"Back inside, Parish," the lawman said. "We—"

"They're gone. I tried to talk sense into—"

The lawman cocked his head. "Into who, Parish?"

Parish held stubbornly silent. One of the two men peered warily inside the Stirrup, then backed away. He shook his head.

"Maybe we'd better have a chat," the lawman invited casually. "Just mosey along this way, Parish. We'll—"

At the noise of the teams and stage, Parish whirled about and he saw the gaunt, yellow-mustached old driver, Ed Carroll, wheeling the stage down the street. Sober faced and determined beside him, old man Havely was riding his own shotgun.

"What's he up to?" Parish queried mechanically. "That redhead plugged. Three others shot dead in the past month, and now he—"

The lawman spat. He didn't answer, but Parish saw the worried frown with which the man followed old Havely's stage. Then a gun barrel prodded his spine and Parish began walking. But his eye followed the stage down the street. He stiffened suddenly as three mounted figures rode into sight farther down. They bunched for a minute watching the stage—planning a last unexpected coup, he knew—and then fogged on along the road.

"Damn it, Sheriff," Parish snarled. "Old Havely'll get his everlastin' ridin' that stage. I know. They'll blast—"

The lawman scowled. "Maybe. But maybe they won't figure on a haul so soon after—"

Both deputies were staring after the stage. Parish started in the indicated doorway, then wheeled. As he had expected, the lawman was flinging one last glance after Havely.

Parish' hand flicked out, grabbed the gun barrel and twisted it savagely. The lawman bellowed. Parish kicked out, smashing his booted toe into the man's unprotected belly. Strength flowed out of him as he sagged, and Parish had the gun. He blasted a quick shot into the walk, scattering the deputies.

He heeled the door shut and ran, leaping a scatter of chairs and plunging for the back exit. They'd hesitate, he knew, be afraid to crowd in after him, knowing that he had a gun.

The door was unbarred and he legged through, twisting to run along the littered alley. Three horses stood hip-shot at a back door. He hit the saddle, wrenching at the reins, wheeling to send the startled animal in wild running. A man's yell came after him. He cut a corner and was in the clear. Another corner. The street loomed ahead, and far in the distance he saw the lifting dust of the fast-rolling stage.

HE WAS a hundred yards down the street before a gun barked behind him; another hundred before a rifle slammed. The slug burned past his head and he flinched, wheeling his mount off the road and into a rag-tag collection of tents that fringed the town.

Men swore. One half-drew his sixgun, but Parish kept his mount going! Scrub-brush covered the hill slope, pinched off to the solid sheet rock of the canyon wall. He'd gained a momentary respite, but he dared not slow. Somewhere ahead, he tried to picture it in his mind, tried to pinpoint just where Lucwwell would make his final try. The slope lifted, dropped, and he had put the ridge between himself and town.

But the law would be coming. He had to reach the stage before . . . . But after he caught it, what? He came out over the road and slid his mount down. Dust still hung in the air. The stage hadn't gone past long ago. He reined after it, riding his stirrups and shoving the mount with the urgency of his drive. A sharp bend, and the road was pinched in now, canyon walls lifting high. There was no getting away from the narrow gut through which the road twisted. If Luckwell and Auger lay hidden somewhere ahead with rifles . . .

The stage was closer. He could see old Havely twisting to peer back, suspicious of the rider overhauling him.

He began to wonder whether he had been mistaken. The logical spot to stop the stage was here, the jumbled rocks giving ideal cover for men and horses, the road narrow under a shoulder-high escarpment.

"Hell!" a voice suddenly yelled. "It's only that damned Parish!"

He recognized Bull Auger's tones. And in that same instant a rifle slammed echoes against the granite cliffs. Parish felt his mount falter and go off balance. The stage was already past the rocks, fleeing crazily.

They'd waited, he supposed, been afraid to try for the stage until they saw just how large a force was following, and now . . . Three rifles blared hasty fusillade after the running teams. A leader went down. Screaming, a big black driver piled up on the fallen animal. The stage rocked, swerved crazily to the report of splintering wagon tongue, and crashed against the cliff.

His mount dropped away, and he lit rolling, coming to his feet and throwing himself tight against a shoulder-high rock.

A rifle slug broke particles from the edge and went whining away. There was reply shot from the splintered wreckage of the stage; and Parish saw that somebody there yet lived. Then two shots came from the stage—from different points. Parish laughed mirthlessly. That shoulder-high rock escarpment was like a trench wall over which old Havely and the Whip were shooting.

"Ike! Ike Parish!"

"Yeah?" He sidled along the rock, changing his position before raising his head.

"We can split it, Ike. Enough for all of us." Luckwell yelled the offer. "Sneak along there and flush them back away from that damned bank."

Parish laughed mockingly.

"It's that ranch we always wanted, Ike," Luckwell argued. "It'll be more money than you'd earn in a month of Sundays. You don't have to kill them, just smoke them out where we—"

"Go to hell!" Parish lifted his head to reply, and he saw Bill Auger sneaking through the rocks toward his cover. He shot fast, lifting rock splinters. Auger began cursing.

No shots were coming from the stage now. They had heard, old Havely and the Whip. They'd be wondering, watching . . . He twisted. Sound was muttering behind him, the pulsing drive of hooves fast running along the road. The law from Teton Rim, he decided.

"Damn it, Parish!" Agitation was in Luckwell's voice as he read the hoof sound.

Parish saw that time was running out for them. He lifted his head above the stone rim, edged the lawman's sixgun. Luke Benoight sidled into view, and he took him with a snap shot. Benoight stood motionless, half turning, then sagged. A rifle slug spattered stone splinters in Parish' face. Through a reddish haze of blood, he saw Bull Auger in the open and racing toward him. The big outlaw was yelling curses, triggering the rifle, coming with one purpose inflexibly fixed in his mind.

Parish triggered, triggered again. Bull Auger faltered. The legs kept churning, but the body had lost its balance.

And then Luckwell's last defiant scream tore through the canyon gloom. A brief glimpse Parish had of him, a split-second spectacle spurring from the broken rockfall. A volley of shots poured from the stage.

Half-sickened, Parish sagged below the stone rim. They'd been friends once, Luckwell and he . . . Two waddies with an aching desire to get their own spread. Two waddies . . .

"Get down here, Parish," old Havely called. "They's somebody hellin' it up this road. Hole in with us till we see who it is. Hurry it up, boy. If that gal of mine thought I let you stand out there to get shot-butchered, why she'd skin me alive."

Parish grinned. For a shotgun guard, maybe that wasn't so bad; better, maybe than the dream he'd thrown away with Luckwell. He moved along to talk it over with old man Havely ● ● ●

His pistol raised. He backed grimly out from behind the press.

WHEEL CITY HEADS WEST

By NOEL LOOMIS

If Wayne Foster couldn't clean up that lawless U. P. town with red-hot editorials, he'd tell 'em with hot lead type—straight from the business end of a .45!

WAYNE FOSTER, editor of the *Wheel City Herald,* finished scrubbing the type-forms with lye-water and a brush. He left them leaning against the wall and thankfully went inside out of the Nebraska sun. He took the tin dipper

from the nail on the wall and dipped it in the pail of water. He took a small drink, made a face, and flung the rest of the tepid water through the open back door.

He said to Yuen Low, his Chinese printer: "They're dry by now."

He and Yuen brought the forms inside. The steel chases were almost too hot to hold. They laid the forms up on the stone, and Yuen unlocked the quoins with short, fast movements of his slender brown hands.

"Notice in *Herald* says Wheel City moves tomorrow," Yuen observed.

"That's right." Wayne took off his apron and said absently, "I'll be glad when the railroad gets to Cheyenne. This business of moving a town every ten days or so is getting monotonous."

"Very nomadic existence, Ed," Yuen said cheerfully.

"My name is Wayne."

"More ink than blood in veins, I think. So call you Ed for Editor."

Wayne began lifting the type from the front page and putting it in galleys, while Yuen worked on the editorial page.

"Maybe," Yuen said, still cheerful, "you won't go to Cheyenne after Orin Guzik reads your editorial asking about railroad ties. Maybe Mr. Orin will visit us with pistol, hey?"

"He won't do that," Wayne said, and he tried to sound confident. "This is 1867. Law and order is coming out here."

Yuen blinked at him. "That very true, but immediate problem is one of survival until said conditions arrive."

Wayne scowled at him. Then he poured water over a galley of type, took it to the case, and set it carefully on the left. "Not if the information you gave me about those ties is correct."

"I have friend who is cook at Mr. Guzik's saloon. Friend not wrong yet, Ed."

"No," said Wayne, "but friend has not spilled himself on anything so serious before." Wayne looked just a little worried. "A charge of delaying the building of the railroad so somebody can get a higher price for ties is nothing to be laughed off. They haven't been laying steel very fast this year anyway." He climbed up on a high stool with a long handful of wet type. "Come on. Get going. They'll load us tomorrow at noon, so we've got to get these forms distributed today."

Yuen's broad Mongolian face was flat, but his bland eyes carried the hint of a twinkle. "I not like to distribute type, Ed. You like it. I go find poker game."

The fingers on Wayne's right hand were rubbing a lump of alum. "Every printer likes distributing. Sometimes," he said thoughtfully, "that's the only reward for a week of hard work."

Yuen got up on the other stool. Wayne's right arm was moving. The pieces of ten-point type began to drop into the case with fast clicks that came in spurts of half a dozen at a time. "It's funny," Wayne said thoughtfully, "how a man gets a little money invested in a place and then gets an overwhelming desire to make the place decent."

Yuen climbed onto the other stool. "You no like dancing girls any more?" he asked.

"No," said Wayne positively. "I'd like to see a girl that would make a wife."

"You have seen nurse from Kansas City, perhaps?"

"No," said Wayne absently.

"She came in on railroad work-train yesterday. Very beautiful—red hair, blue eyes. Very round and soft-looking."

Wayne was staring at him. "Are you fooling?"

Yuen said demurely, "You are editor of *Wheel City Herald*, newspaper that tells all. But you don't know about the new nurse?"

THE screen door slammed. A big man wearing a tall hat came in. He had a harness-maker's awl stuck in his belt, and he carried a roll of yellow leather.

"How's the mayor of Wheel City?" asked Wayne, putting a lead in the galley.

"Not very good," said Milton Spafford.

Wayne looked at him. Spafford's gaze shifted, and he didn't meet Wayne's eyes. "You can elect another mayor when you get to the new end of the track," he said. "I'm going back to civilization."

Wayne stared at him. "We're almost to Wyoming Territory," Wayne said. "In three months more we'll hit Cheyenne, and I aim to stop off there, Spafford. Cheyenne will make a good town. The Indians are under control. If you and I stop in Cheyenne, there'll be five hundred people stop with us." His eyes looked far away. "You can't quit now. We're about to tap a new, rich land. There's gold—and furs—and some day they'll take timber and more minerals out of that territory. The Union Pacific is just opening it up to the white man." He stopped, overwhelmed by his own ardor. "It's an empire, Spafford—and it won't be on wheels. We won't have to move every time the track crew makes fifteen or twenty miles. There'll be stores in place of all these gambling joints, and there'll be decent women to marry. Why, thunderation, man, we've followed the U. P. clear across Nebraska. You can't *quit* now."

"He can, and he will," said a harsh voice from outside the front screen. Orin Guzik, small, pale-faced, quick-eyed, pushed in. He wore a revolver low on his hip. "So will you, Foster."

Wayne set down the half-handful of type carefully and then got down from the stool and faced Guzik. At Guzik's left and slightly to his rear stood Lobo Kelty, a two-gun man, big and glassy-eyed. Foster looked them over. "*I'm* not quitting," he said.

"You better," Guzik said flatly. "There's a lot of people going to stop at Cheyenne, and I'm going to stop with them. I don't want no table-pounding mayor or no drum-beating editor in Cheyenne. I've got my own mayor, and I'll have my own newspaper. I'm serving warning, Foster. Don't move with Wheel City tomorrow." He hitched up his gun-belt.

Wayne felt a desire to look back at Yuen Low—but he didn't. "What's eating you?" he asked Guzik.

"You shot off your mouth in this week's paper, Foster. I reckon you wanted to stir up trouble—and you did. Some of the officials in Omaha are coming out here next week to investigate."

Wayne wet his lips a little. "I asked if the railroad wouldn't be built faster if they didn't have a contract to buy ties from just one man," he said cautiously.

"You said it so as to make people think I hold back the ties until I get more money."

"Don't you?" Wayne asked abruptly.

Guzik's face began to turn dark. "You're too nosey, Foster. You've been nosey before—and it generally means trouble for me. I don't know where you get your information and I don't know where you get the nerve to accuse an honest citizen of trying to hold up a railroad."

Wayne, nettled, said, "I don't know where you get an honest citizen."

Guzik's eyes blazed up. He said, "You got your orders. When Wheel City moves tomorrow, you move the other way, Foster."

Wayne stood tall and lean. His gray eyes were like polished rocks. "You've given your orders, Guzik. Now I'll tell you something. Cheyenne will need a free newspaper more than ever with a skunk like you around. I'm moving with Wheel City tomorrow."

Guzik's right hand twitched. Then he drew back slowly, and his eyes were hard. "You better take good advice, Foster. If I see you in Wheel City's next stop, I'll shoot on sight." He turned and left, with Lobo Kelty lumbering along behind.

The screen door slammed after them. Wayne looked with new understanding at Milton Spafford, who had said no word. "You got your orders," Wayne said to Spafford, "That's why you decided to go back so fast."

Spafford's big shoulders rolled uneasily. "I'm not ready to die," he muttered.

"We've come clear across Nebraska with the U. P.," Wayne said flatly. "I've got a subscription list and a nice little business. People respect the *Herald*. No, I'm not running. If I go back to Omaha now, I'll go in a box."

"If Guzik comes after you," Spafford said uneasily, "they'll leave you out here on the prairie."

Yuen Low looked up and said, "Don't worry, Ed." He picked up a poker from beside his galley of type and brandished it vigorously. "I will defend you from physical attack."

Wayne looked at him and laughed grimly. Then he said speculatively to the mayor: "If Guzik is playing tricks with those ties, as I think he is doing, there must be somebody else in on it—somebody on the railroad side."

"If there is," said Spafford, "it will be twice as dangerous."

Wayne paid no attention to him. "I'm going to have a talk with Cronin, the track superintendent. I want to know how he sides in this argument. Maybe Guzik will get a showdown before he's ready for it."

Spafford left, looking hunted. "He'll be gone by night," Wayne predicted.

Yuen Low, busily throwing-in type, observed, "He's afraid for his life, Ed."

Wayne agreed. "He's scared." Then he said, "Look for me back this afternoon."

"You'll miss all this throwing-in, Ed."

"Save a galley or two for me," said Wayne, and went outside.

WHEEL CITY'S Main Street was about two blocks long, laid out in a perpendicular from the railroad track. The street was lined with businesses—grocery stores, two hardwares, the harness shop, a bootmaker's, a jeweler's, and all the usual businesses of a small town. The only difference was that Wheel City moved every ten days or two weeks to keep up with the steel.

There were a good many laborers on the railroad, and most of them were Civil War veterans, but some of them had families, and all of them had money to spend. That money made Wheel City, the town that moved. The buildings that housed the families and businesses of Wheel City were flimsy. They could be torn down and put up again. The fixtures and goods were arranged for quick moving. Wayne Foster's press and his type-cases had been on skids all the way from Omaha.

And at noon tomorrow they would go into action. Every person in Wheel City would pitch in, and all available laborers from the railroad would descend and give a hand. By six o'clock the entire town would be loaded on flat-cars and would be rolling west to the end of the track. By midnight the town would be unloaded, and by the next day at noon the hot, unshaded Main Street would be lined with buildings again and people would act like people in any town.

Foster walked up Main Street north to the new grade. He noted that a couple of lines of steel made a lot of difference, for the element of Wheel City that wanted to be decent stayed on the south side. On the north was Orin Guzik and his saloons and gambling-houses.

Wayne stayed at the grade and caught the supply foreman going out to the end of the track on a hand-car pumped by two big Mexicans. He rode with them. The foreman was feeling pretty good. "Our only trouble now is getting ties," he said. "We're laying two miles a day and that takes plenty of ties." He pulled his faded felt hat down tight on his head as the flat-car started on a long down-grade. "With good luck we'll be in Cheyenne by the middle of the summer."

"What if you *don't* have good luck?" asked Foster.

The foreman looked at him curiously. "Nothing can hold back the railroad for long," he said. "Maybe for a year or two or maybe ten. But eventually she's going through, regardless of Indians or anybody

else, because this is a big country, and it needs the railroad. . . ."

Foster found Cronin, the superintendent, in a small shack set off at one side of the track. It had two-by-four handles on opposite sides so that four laborers could carry it around. It was too small for both of them to be inside at once, and Cronin came out. His face was big and he had a long jaw.

Wayne told him there was disagreement in the town about whether Wheel City should be conducted like a well-organized town. "And you," he said, "represent the railroad. The town exists because of the railroad, and so your attitude is important. All I want to know is—are you on the side that favors a decent town?"

"Sure," Cronin said, "I'm with you. Of course, Wheel City isn't an incorporated town," he said deprecatingly, "but we believe in law and order." His eyes dropped. "Of course you realize you can't keep men from gambling and drinking. What else is there for them to do?"

"I don't care about that," said Foster, "but I do care when men with revolvers on their hips tell other men to go back home."

"Are they doing that?" Cronin asked, but Foster did not think he was surprised. "The railroad furnishes a constable, you know, to keep order. Maybe you should notify him if there is trouble."

"One-Arm Walker," said Foster flatly, "is too old and feeble to keep order, even if he could see past the end of a revolver—which he can't. It would be sending him to a quick death to ask him to stand up to Guzik and Kelty—and you know it!" he charged. "Walker is furnished by the railroad just to placate the public."

"That's strong talk," Cronin said evasively. "You forget that you're on railroad property."

"That doesn't change the fact," said Wayne, "that you owe a responsibility to those who live here."

Cronin looked up. His eyes were small and there was an unexpected edge to his voice. "And you also owe a duty to me, Foster. You went over my head by printing that editorial about ties without consulting me first."

Wayne recognized the justice of the charge, but he didn't acknowledge it; he didn't admit that he had done that deliberately because he was dubious of Cronin and because he wanted to force quick action rather than take a chance on being submerged in red tape and seeing the railroad delayed until November would catch them still short of Cheyenne—for the prospect of another winter on the open Plains, with the certainty of snow and wind and severe cold, and always the possibility of Indian trouble if they presented too tempting a target, would send most of the law-respecting citizens back East.

So Wayne said instead, "I'm going further. I don't believe the officials in Omaha know what is going on out here, so I am going to make a public demand that the railroad furnish a real law-enforcement officer." He snorted. "I could take a poker and whip One-Arm Walker in a gunfight on his best day."

Cronin looked at him. Cronin's face got longer and his small eyes showed a dangerous glint. "You're forcing a show-down, Foster. Maybe you better think twice."

"I've thought once," Wayne retorted: "Once is enough when you think straight."

He left. On his way back he stopped for a moment to watch the track crew. Ten men slid a rail off the front end of the flat-car and lifted it into place at the end of the track. A man at the far end of the rail measured the distance between the two rails and stood up. Then four Irishmen with sledge-hammers drove in spikes all at once to hold the rails in place while a single horse pushed the flat-car ahead over the new rails, and another crew finished spiking the rails behind. Foster looked up to the west. Out there, far beyond man's sight, were the Rockies. Some day these rails would be

there. A lot of men wouldn't get there with them—some bad men, some good men. Some got tired, some got sick, some were killed by bullets. Every time Wheel City moved to the end of the track to keep up with the crews, there was a grave or two left behind to keep company with the lines of rubbish that marked the abandoned streets. . . .

EARLY in the afternoon Foster rode back to Wheel City with the supply-train. When they came close, he heard shots. He dropped off of a flat-car and ran down Main Street. At the corner of Main and Broadway there was a gang-fight. Knots of men all over the street were battling each other.

"Lobo Kelty and a bunch of his men came over and started shooting up the town and warning everybody over here not to move with the city tomorrow," said Jack the barber, who was nursing a bandaged arm. "Some of the boys didn't like it."

"Which side are you on?" asked Foster suddenly.

Jack grinned wanly. "I didn't get this bullet-hole backing Lobo Kelty. And personally, I think I've learned my lesson. Think I'll take the next train east. If these boys want to have Cheyenne to themselves, I'm not going to be the one who says no."

"I am," said Foster determinedly. He went into the barber shop and got a stool. He set it up on the dirt sidewalk in front of the barber shop and mounted it. "Men!" he said. His throat was dry and leathery from spending the afternoon under the sun. He tried again. "Men!" One or two looked up. He began to talk. "We've got to have order in Wheel City. No man's life will be safe until we establish a sound government."

"Yah," said a little man with a bloody ear, "look who's talkin' while we're fightin'."

They jeered him. There was a motion, and Lobo Kelty heaved a piece of two-by-four at Foster. Wayne ducked, and the two-by-four went through Jack the Barber's window.

"Yah," said the little man. "It wasn't his own window that got broke."

More jeers. Foster got down, white-faced. It looked as if the little man was right. The only thing to bring order was straight shooting. He went half a block on Broadway to the *Herald* office.

Yuen Low was gone—probably out somewhere with his head in a barrel, waiting for the shooting to stop, Foster thought sarcastically. He went over to his roll-top desk and from under the stamp-drawer on the right side he drew a pile of letters. Behind them was a six-shooter. He pulled it out, looked at the cylinder. It was loaded. He thrust it under his belt.

The hot sun had been strong on the open flat-cars, and his mouth was like cotton. He walked around the type-cases and went to the bucket of water on the wash-stand behind the small cylinder-press. He got the dipper full and raised it to his lips. In that motion he saw a man's boots sticking out from between the press and the wall.

He froze for an instant, then he dropped the dipper in the bucket and bent over to look. He saw the gray whiskers of One-Arm Walker, the constable of Wheel City. The old man had been shot through the forehead.

Foster straightened up, shocked. He looked down at Walker and then he realized he had his own revolver in his hand. His lips began to tighten. His pistol raised. He backed grimly out from behind the press.

He reached the wash-stand and turned around. Then his pistol dropped slowly, for he was looking into the guns of Orin Guzik and Lobo Kelty.

Guzik's cold eyes seemed amused. He glanced at the boot protruding from behind the press. "So that's what happened to the law," he said, looking back at Foster.

"What do you mean?"

"You killed old man Walker to try to throw it on us. Pretty slick—but not slick enough. We caught you red-handed."

Foster went cold. "You caught me?" he repeated dumbly.

Guzik sneered. "You've got a gun in your hand. You're standing over Walker's dead body."

Foster swallowed painfully. He looked at Lobo Kelty's big .44 and his over-bright eyes. "How did you know that was Walker?" he asked then.

Guzik's cold eyes glittered a little. "Don't ask questions. I'll give you some advice. If you don't want to swing for killing this harmless old man, you better go back east with the supply-train tonight. If you leave without making any trouble, Lobo and I will forget that we caught you standing over Walker's body."

Guzik and Kelty backed away, with Foster beginning to grind his teeth. He stood helpless under their guns until they went through the door; then he lifted his pistol and ran for the front. He ran through the door but came up at full length against Yuen Low.

Yuen Low grunted as he fell flat on his back. Foster picked himself up and gave the Chinese a hand, then he looked for Guzik. The man had disappeared in the crowd on the corner. Foster turned back.

"You were leaving expeditiously, Ed," Yuen Low suggested, brushing his clothes while Foster looked grimly out of the window.

"I was going back after Guzik. They've got me framed for the murder of Walker," he said harshly.

Yuen Low was bland. He stopped and picked a piece of type from the floor and threw it in the lower-case *e* compartment. "I might suggest it would be more healthier to do as advised," he said.

Foster swung around. "The *Herald* is the one big stumbling-block to Guzik and his ambition to make Cheyenne a city of vice. I'm not going east, Yuen Low. I'm going west. "Say," he said suddenly, "where have you been while they planted Walker's body in here."

The Chinese said blandly, "I was tired of throwing in type. I was delivering a box of printed number-ten envelopes to the grocery store."

Foster looked suspicious. Then he said abruptly, "I'm going for Spafford, and we'll organize the law in this town."

"Sorry, Ed," said Yuen Low. "Honorable mayor went east on the noon train."

Foster stared at him for a moment, then he gripped his revolver tightly and stepped toward the door. "I've got a dead body on my hands, and something has to be done. I'm going to do it. I'll see Guzik and we'll have a showdown."

"Is very risky, Ed," Yuen Low murmured. . . .

ONCE across the track, Foster had no trouble finding Guzik's headquarters, the Whiskey on Wheels Saloon. He hit the swinging door with his elbow and stalked in toward the back. He turned the knob of the door and hit the door with his foot at the same time. The door flew back, and Foster stepped through.

There was a round table in the center of the room, and on it was a stack of gold pieces but no cards. Guzik, small and slim, was sitting at the far side of the table facing the door. At his back was a safe and a roll-top desk.

Lobo Kelty was standing at the left side of the table. Guzik's eyes and Lobo's eyes were both like snakes waiting to strike.

Foster kicked the door shut behind him without looking back. He glared at Guzik. "I'm going west tomorrow," he said, "but you're going east—dead or alive."

Guzik said quietly but with pressure behind his words: "You wouldn't shoot me without an even break, would you, Foster?"

"I'll give you an even break." Foster nodded at Lobo Kelty. "Toss your gun on the table."

Lobo did, slowly, carefully, while Foster kept him covered. Foster looked at Guzik. "You too," he said. Guzik did.

Foster put his own revolver on the table. "When my hand gets to my side," he said before releasing it, "reach for your gun."

His hand drew back. Guzik stood up. Guzik snatched his pistol before Foster expected it. Foster grabbed his own gun and lunged sidewise. Guzik's bullet seared the side of his shoulders, then Foster shot him through the breastbone.

As Guzik began to fold, Lobo Kelty was jumping for his gun. Foster turned on him and aimed at him through the smoke. As he pulled the trigger, something hit him between the shoulder-blades. He didn't drop the pistol, but he tripped over Guzik's arm and sprawled face down.

A new voice said, "Get up—but don't bring the gun with you."

Foster half-turned to look into Cronin's long face. The track superintendent held a small-caliber pistol aimed at him.

Foster got up slowly. A lot of things looked clear now. He said to Cronin, "You were just now getting paid off for the last shipment of ties. How much over the regular price did you give him for them?"

"You talk too much," said Cronin.

Foster nodded. "And too loud, I guess. That's the reason, I suppose, why Guzik killed Walker—to get rid of me, one way or another. Or did *you* do that job?"

Cronin glanced at Guzik's body on the floor. "Guzik did it. He's dead now. He won't be able to go to Cheyenne with Lobo and me." His pistol-muzzle raised a fraction. "You won't either."

Foster started to jump. He saw the cold murder in Cronin's eyes. But the door opened behind Cronin. It opened very swiftly. The bland face of Yuen Low showed for an instant, and then Cronin went down with a poker bent across the top of his head.

Lobo Kelty started to shoot the Chinese, but Foster whirled and launched himself at Lobo's legs. Lobo started down. Yuen Low took a cut at him with the poker. But Lobo Kelty was well named. He seized the poker and pulled Yuen Low off balance. The Chinese fell in front of him, and Lobo drew back to pound Yuen Low on the top of the head with his revolver.

But Foster heard a clang and looked up to see a second Chinese swinging a skillet at Lobo's head. Lobo ducked. The skillet performed a change of direction and came down on Lobo's head with a note like that of a bronze bell in an old temple.

Foster and Yuen Low got up. Foster stared at the second Chinese. "She's a woman!" he said to Yuen Low. "Is that the one?"

"Yes, Ed," said Yuen Low, looking softly at the broad face of the young Chinese woman. "She's my friend. She's Wang Lin Fah."

"But she worked here for Guzik," Wayne said, looking at her apron. "Why are you on my side?"

"Ed, in Cheyenne we are going to be married," Yuen Low said blandly. "We want good place to raise our children."

The bartender looked cautiously through the open door. He stared at the bodies on the floor. He straightened up. "I guess I'll be going east tomorrow."

"You can have your choice," said Foster. "There's room for an honest bartender." Foster looked at Yuen Low's bland face. "And Yuen Low, for the moment, is constable of Wheel City—at least until we get Cronin and Lobo taken care of. Then we've got some type to throw-in, if we're going west tomorrow."

"Yes, Ed," said Yuen Low.

Foster looked speculatively at Lin Fah. Then he patted the side of his head with the handkerchief and said, trying to sound casual, "I think I'd better get the nurse to look at this cut on my head."

"You get head fixed," Yuen Low said suddenly. "This one time I like to throw-in type." ● ● ●

BLIND CANYON MANHUNT

By VAN CORT

His hand flew back and raked out his pistol.

Just three things stood between the fugitive and his return to prison: His gun, the promise of a stranger he didn't trust, and the lie of a woman he must believe in.

FROM a distance the three men in their fleece-lined coats and sombreros looked alike. Their horses were tense and frisky in the nippy autumn air, as they moved up through the narrow mountain valley.

Lew Mitchell kept watching Clark Younger, the first deputy, who rode point, his sharp eyes ransacking every bit of cover. This man Mitchell he had never liked, and the bright image of Sheila Tarrant was ever painfully between them.

Bill Tarrant, Sheila's father, pulled up his big gray road horse. "This manhunt's a wild goose chase, Clark." There was tired irritation in his voice. "They never came this far north. They'd have frozen to death nights. . . . A man would head south, naturally."

Important acting and with an easy arrogance, Tarrant always spoke his mind bluntly. Clark Younger turned his horse and managed a deferential smile. "As you know, it's the warden's opinion—"

"Yeah, to hell with the warden!" said Tarrant.

Mitchell had to kill his own smile as he studied Tarrant's brown, gold-flecked eyes, the hard, yet generous lines around his mouth. A man, he thought, lived his own private life behind his face, and his gods were his own. "I'm inclined to agree with him, Clark," he said. "We can't catch them. It's much too long and thin a chance by now."

Younger's eyes, angrily vindictive, were upon him at once, the natural animosity between these two men was evident now. "You agreed to do your share, Lew. . . ."

Mitchell shrugged.

It had been in the midst of a leisurely noon crowd at Tucker House several days earlier that Younger had interrupted with the official telegram. The quiet drinking, the post-mortems on cattle deals, and the speculations over next week's prices and weather stopped, while Younger gave out descriptions of the convicts who had broken from the dreaded Bennington State Pen, a hundred and fifty miles to the south. It seemed that at least some of them had headed toward Sundance Valley.

At the mention of Bennington State, images had at once formed in Lew Mitchell's mind. He lifted his half empty glass, and, as he finished the drink, a long-buried reflex triggered off the remark, "Well, here's luck to the poor devils."

Someone grunted sympathetically, and another chuckled outright, but the remark nevertheless floated on a sudden silence like a strange wild bird on a barnyard pond.

In this quiet Mitchell unobtrusively paid for his drink and started for the door.

"Oh, Lew!" Younger said condescendingly, "we're going to have to make up several small posse details to cover this area. We could use your help, Lew."

"I'm a busy man, Clark. Count me out. . . ."

That, too, had been the wrong thing to say, and Younger at once countered, much too politely. "You know the ridge territory beyond your place better than anyone. I guess I'll have to deputize you, whether you like it or not."

And so he had come on a manhunt in which he had no heart. Younger was saying to him, "These men are desperadoes, Lew, dangerous. Not 'poor devils' to be wished luck." He turned to Tarrant again, "The landscape is breaking up too much. Maybe we had better split up. Lew could take the northwest hills, I'll go the middle, and you, Mr. Tarrant, might cover the south side of the valley. How's that?"

Tarrant grunted amicably at this welcome opportunity to turn home, once he'd gotten out of sight and said, "It's colder than hell, Lew. Could we have a nip from that flask of yours?"

Mitchell fished the bottle from his saddle pocket. "Keep it, if you like."

The older man gave him a look, had his long nip, and handed the bottle back. Younger refused, but Mitchell had his own drink. The deputy said then, "We could meet at Drover's Ford. In case of trouble, fire the usual two-and-one warning."

Alone, Lew let his horse, Peso, climb an oblique slope and sat building a leisurely smoke. It was a pretty day. Somewhere the sun blinked off a snowy mountain ridge, and the atmosphere stood crisp and blue and crackly like glass. He thought of the rugged miles that lay between here and Bennington State. It would be cruel miles for hunted men at this season, what with

freezing nights in the high mesas and ranges without shelter. The land, he thought, was always stronger than the people who defied it, and, in the end, won. He had read that somewhere, and it seemed true. The land won.

The break was six days old by now. Of the ten men, five had been brought back walking, three dead. Two were still to be accounted for by a law which was sometimes more relentless than the land. He pictured the warden's set, bulldog face and hard blue eyes . . . and with a conscious, reminiscent shudder he forced the image from his mind.

Peso high-stepped a bit through tall, yellow grass, skirted clumps of juniper, alder, a small scraggly stand of pine, and came to a stand-still with throaty little sounds and head-tossings that rattled the bit. "Come on . . ." The man in the saddle touched spur without thinking; the animal cantered a tiny circle and went on.

MITCHELL was wet with sweat; the light went from the sky with a silent crack, and his hand flew back and raked out the pistol. In a moment he was bending from the saddle over the supine figure under the bush.

It was a hard-scored, young, bitter face, a bony frame under an ill-fitting duck jacket and faded jeans. The sleep was feverish, heaving; bright spots blossomed redly on the cheek bones, and the lips were dry. A thin flannel blanket had been wrapped tightly about the chest under the jacket.

Slowly, Lew Mitchell holstered the gun and dismounted. He stood reading the ghastly journey written in the scratched and torn clothes, the caked blood and dirt, the chapped, frozen hands. Across country, through rivers, through woods and thickets, waiting, listening, running again . . . the sound of pursuers in the back of the mind; precarious, hopeful freedom beckoning mockingly in front . . .

He tapped the all but ruined, stone-scarred shoes, and an odd gentleness shook his deep voice, "A bad place to pick for a sleep, hombre. You'll catch your death . . ."

The face stirred violently in awakening; the arms and legs twitched desperately in a futile effort to turn the body and get up. The eyes opened blue and cold and horribly disturbed, seeing Mitchell's tall outline against the light, seeing the pistol, the badge, the horse standing by trailing rein. The swollen lips quivered, emitting choked sounds. The eyes then became depthless pools of despair.

Mitchell knelt down. "You're in a bad way, friend."

The eyelids had closed tightly, the shaking fists clenched till white showed at the knuckles. Mitchell raised the man to a sitting position, feeling at the same time for weapons and finding none. "Drink some of this. Put some warmth in you. Come on . . ."

A hand tried to take the bottle but fell listlessly. "Come on," said Mitchell. "Here . . ."

The man on the ground choked, heaved, shook his head, but managed to get some of the liquor down. Mitchell let him drink again, watching him shake and shudder with sudden violence. The blue eyes looked up at him then, foggily, over measureless bitter distances. "Whyn't you use that gun? Might as well . . ." He swayed a little, and his head sank forward; then dully, his shoulders hunched, he held his hands out, the wrists close together.

Mitchell shrugged. The handcuffs! Clark Younger had given him a pair; they were in Peso's saddle pocket. No, he should never have come on this damnable hunt. He took the man under the arm and lifted, wondering at the scrawny lightness in his grip. "Can you get up? Can you walk?"

The captive turned slowly over on his knees and climbed laboriously to his feet as if a hundred-pound weight sat on his shoulders. He turned to Mitchell a face completely devoid of expression. Twenty-one,

twenty-two at most, Mitchell thought. What does a man know at twenty-two? Either too much or too little. Never just enough.

They were two tiny figures against the vast rolling landscape and immense, cold hills. The land had won. The stranger coughed, took a wobbly step forward before his knees buckled under him. . . .

* * *

Tarrant was stubbornly still there when they watered their horses at Drover's Ford. "Well, it's over with. Let's go home."

Younger fastened an oblique slate-eyed look upon Mitchell. "Saw nothing, did you?"

"I haven't got anyone in my pocket."

"Don't know what you expected, Clark," Tarrant said then. "I told you no one would come this far." He turned from footing stirrup, "Lew, could I cadge another drink off you?"

Mitchell, suddenly sweaty again, patted the saddle pocket, then his coat. He made a show of confusion. "Funny, I haven't got it."

"That's a fine situation on a cold day."

Younger said, too dryly, "You had it back there when you both had a nip."

"Must have dropped from my pocket." Mitchell kept his attention on Tarrant, praying they would not notice that his under saddleblanket was gone too. Damned careless thing, leaving that bottle with the convict! Slowly the three of them mounted and headed for home.

CHAPTER TWO

World Within Reach

WHEN in the thin, dark shank of the evening he carried his burden, heels dragging, across his kitchen porch to bump the door open, Mrs. Alvord, his housekeeper, turned from the stove with a small startled cry.

"A hand, Mrs. Alvord. I'm lame from riding with him across my legs. Into *my* room, I guess."

Disturbed, she came over and picked up the stranger's legs. In the bedroom she had her moment of squirming before she let the shoes down upon the neat pink bed spread. A trouser leg had slid up revealing a scarred, ulcerated ankle; a riveted leg iron and bit of chain had been tied to the calf to prevent chafing.

"Got the fever, ague, or something," Mitchell said flatly. "I fed him whisky." His sudden silence spoke volumes. The old woman gave him a keen glance, then went around to the night table and struck a match for the lamp. "So young," she said as the yellow light fell over the bed. "How did he ever get this far, Lew?"

"Ran. Ran and walked, I guess. He looks it. God only knows."

She noted the disturbance in Mitchell, then laid a hand on the fugitive's forehead. "Yes, God only knows." She said then, "I'd guess at pneumonia. If you would get him under covers . . ." In the door she turned. "The whisky may have helped, I don't know. Lew, we shouldn't send for . . . Doc Wells, should we?"

Mitchell met her glance. "See what you can do for him; hot soup or anything. Beyond you and Ben knowing, he ain't here, you understand?"

Just then Ben Alvord came walking up the corridor carpet in his stocking feet. "Ain't nobody gonna eat supper here tonight?" Mitchell heard Mrs. Alvord say, "Ben, Lew wants you . . ." In another moment the strawboss's gray-mustached bald head peered around the door frame. His eyes widened, and, at the sight of the leg iron, he whistled softly. "Well, Lew . . . ?"

When Mrs. Alvord came back with bottles of hot water, the two men had the patient undressed and under quilts. She packed the bottles in around him, and began bathing the pale face with a wash rag. Mitchell said suddenly, "I'll do for him,

Mrs. Alvord. There's no reason why—"

"Lew," she said evenly. "You just leave me to it. . . . Ben, you'll have to get a fire going in here. Colder than a vault."

The three of them had supper in silence. Presently Mitchell and Ben talked about the ranch work to be done the next day, and Mitchell thought of the nine years that Ben and his wife had worked for him and how he never expected them to leave. He said suddenly: "He made his way more'n hundred and fifty miles on foot, through the roughest country he could pick. . . ." He paused and shook his head slowly. "The look he gave me when I woke him up in the grass. . . . I guess I never want to see that in a man's eyes again."

And now he was back at that cowcamp, some fifteen years ago, early in the morning just after the crew had ridden off. Only the cook was there. He was sicker than a dog and couldn't walk any farther, and had debated whether to try to sneak a horse from the remuda, or just limp in and chance it asking for food.

That cook was the toughest human he had ever seen, before or since, dirty, sharp-eyed, and lean like an old wolf. He smelled the youngster's game at once and joked about it while he fed him and plied him with nips of whisky. He spied the leg-iron too, and laughed out loud, "A hell of a thing for a grown man to hump around with," and fetched farrier's tools from the supply wagon to smash the rivets and pry the iron apart with tongs. Something else left the boy when that iron fell to the ground. He had never forgotten it. The cook's old, evil face, as he dabbed a lump of black axle grease on the shackle sore, was the most beautiful thing Lew had ever seen. When the posse rode up later, Lew was some distance from the camp, wrangling horses, and the cook yelled out at him, "Hey, Mitchell, hey, Lew . . . you seen a 'scaped convic' or somepin' passin' by here?"

Lew Mitchell had been his name ever since. He had made it a good name. He realized later that the cook had hated the law for his own reasons and had helped him mostly to settle some score. It had been a cute trick. But what Mitchell was doing now was no trick.

HE STOOD looking now at that completely strange face in the bed, behind which might be anything. The bitter blue eyes had wanted freedom. He remembered: *You had a shackle on your leg with a heavy bar at the end of its chain, and you carried that when you walked in rows with other men, older and bitterer even than you. When you looked up from the walls, there was a narrow rectangle of sky with Fifteen Years in ghost letters written across it. You dreamed of getting out, and running . . . running.*

What had this one done? Murdered? Stolen? Was he no good?

"He took most of the beef broth," Mrs. Alvord said. "I hope it stays down. He's burning up . . . hardly knows what he's doing. . . ." Shaking her head, she went back to the kitchen.

There was a noise of wheels in front of the house, and somebody cracked a whip loudly. Mitchell's heart almost stopped. Everything was wrong now.

Sheila Tarrant sat in her new buggy, her heavy shawl and a lap robe over her evening gown, and a little blue velvet hat riding belligerently on the solid wave of her reddish-yellow hair. The lines were tight and tense in her hands, and the big red tripped nervously on the spot. As Lew in consternation hurried down the steps in shirtsleeves and riding vest, the girl drew in her breath, adjusted her chin and stared straight ahead. Her voice was dangerously light and airy.

"Well . . . Mr. Mitchell?"

"Sheila . . . Great Lord . . ." He clapped his flat hand to his temple. "I clean forgot . . ."

They had been close and understanding

when she had agreed, over Clark Younger's bid, to let him take her to Brotherson's whist party and dance in town.

"You forgot? You *forgot?*" Incredulous injury was in her tone. "And I thought perhaps something was wrong. . . ." The humiliation over having called on him made the reins shake in her hands. "Be sure, Lew, you'll never get another chance to forget!" Flicking the whip over the red's withers, she abruptly started the horse out of the yard.

He ran a few paces after her. "Sheila! For God's sake, wait a moment!" But she was gone.

As he went up the steps slowly, Mrs. Alvord, in the doorway, said, in self-deprecation, "Now, what have we went and done . . . *I* should have remembered!"

An hour later, shaven and spruced up, he entered the Brotherson home at the end of main street in Sundance. The card playing was over and couples were dancing in the dining room to piano and fiddle. After receiving Mrs. Brotherson's somewhat chill greeting, Lew Mitchell at once cut on Clark Younger. He gave Sheila up easily. "I'll be cutting back," Younger said.

The girl was stiff and cold in Mitchell's arms. His pulses raced crazily. "I don't blame you for being angry . . ." he began.

"I'd as soon you hadn't come here now. You made me look ridiculous."

"Something came up, and it couldn't be helped. I'm sorry."

"First you forgot. Clean forgot. Now something came up."

"I guess I can't explain. . . ."

"A great secret," she said with utter scorn, and slowly stopped dancing. "Mr. Mitchell, that's a little too thin for me."

He looked at the tense profile turned away from him. In her injured pride she was beautiful. Pride? he thought. Was that all that counted between a man and a woman? All he desired in the world was suddenly within the reach of his arms, and he had lost it irrevocably. A certain quick anger surprised him and tautened his voice. "I guess you'd have to take my word, Sheila."

She gave him a sudden, direct look, but Clark Younger cut in leisurely. "You had your turn, Mitchell," and waltzed the girl back onto the floor.

Murderously, he watched her chatting animatedly with Younger, and turned abruptly, and went into the wide hall where a crowd of men talked around the punch bowl and refreshments. The house was large; there were almost forty people present. Bill Tarrant, in senatorial white vest and wing collar, said dryly, "You seem to be doing fine, Lew. She was ready to horsewhip you when you didn't show up." He chuckled cynically, and Mitchell didn't know whether the man was friendly or not. "Catch 'em young, treat 'em rough, and tell 'em nothing, eh? Here, have a cup of punch. You probably need it."

Mitchell tried to smile over the dainty cup; he nodded to several men. Tarrant said, "Shake hands with Marshal Stevens, Lew. State marshal. Just got in town . . . taking up the wild-goose chase where we left off."

The music in the vast dining room stopped. The gray, pleasant-faced man smiled indulgently in Tarrant's direction. "Nine of those fellows accounted for. I think the last one came this way and the trail still seems to be hot. . . ." He sipped his punch and accepted a cigar. "I brought some of his clothing along . . . and bloodhounds."

The hum of conversation from the dining room was a distant murmur. The ladies fluttered their fans in the close air, making a pretty stir in the chandelier lights. Clark Younger came out, smugly important, and fetched two cups of punch. Mitchell said hollowly, "What did this one do? A tough hombre?"

"A wild kid, Hepburn. Mixed up in that Denver Rio Grande holdup three years ago. Cattle stealing . . . and got a notch on his

gun somewhere along the road. You know how it goes once they get started. . . . No, he's up for about twenty years . . . be nearer thirty when we catch up with him—if we get him alive."

Lew Mitchell went outside on the gallery, wanting air. The music started up again. The stars blinked down over the vast, dark land. Over the gay laughter he heard again Mamie Alvord's words, "So young . . . God only knows." In a little while he quietly went down and got his horse from the livery stable.

* * *

Hepburn looked up at him from the unaccustomed white pillow. Fever still blossomed faintly on the ridgy cheekbones, but now, on this third day when the crisis had passed, the blue eyes had come clear to the insecurity of hunted alertness. "What are you gonna do? Do I get a chance to run?"

"I'll make you no promises."

"Then why did you bother . . . with, with all this? Why didn't you leave me lay? I'd sooner have died out there."

Mitchell said nothing, and Hepburn murmured half to himself, "Just let me near a horse, and I'll show you my dust . . . if only . . ." He made an effort to rise, but sank back.

"You wouldn't last a quarter mile in the saddle." The remark came out inadvertently.

"I'd make tracks." Minute candle lights showed in the fugitive's eyes. "You'd never hear of me again."

"What kind of tracks? You killed a man once! You stole cattle! You were in that holdup!" Was this someone long ago talking to Mitchell?

"You never do anything wrong in your life, Mister?"

"I didn't say that."

"The holdup; well, that was a mistake. A mistake I tell you! I didn't know it was to be. . . . The man, that was personal. It was either him or me—no choice at all."

"That's what they all say."

The prison walls, the leg irons, the walks in rows, the despair, yes, and the depravity. The cloud in Lew Mitchell's mind cast its shadows on his features.

"I wouldn't make no tracks like that, I swear! I done nothing when I broke out. Only run. Turn me in and they'll take me back dead." The voice shook. "They don't give a man a chance in . . . that place. They don't. . . ."

Mitchell said nothing, and Hepburn managed to rise on one elbow. "A man could start over; a man could . . . in a new place. Once he was free, he could start over, if he had a chance."

A man? Mitchell thought. A man? A kid. He said, making his voice angry: "Words! They don't cost a damned thing, do they?"

Hepburn sank back. "What can I do? What do you want me to say?"

Ben Alvord came quietly into the room, wearing his gun. He went to the bed unobtrusively. "I figger we had better put this on, maybe." With a large padlock and a chain in one hand, he fished for the short end of shackle chain under the covers. Hepburn sat up now, staring at Mitchell.

Mitchell's voice had a weary rasp to it. "No, Ben. Wait! I reckon not. I brought him here. I had no call to. He's a guest in my house. It's on *my* shoulders entire." He took the chain and padlock from Alvord and put them on the window sill.

In the door he turned on Hepburn. "As man to man, can you give me your word, not to make a break without letting me know?"

The convict's eyes burned in him; he said hoarsely, "You're the boss."

Alvord said in the corridor, "Where will this lead? You know this marshal is chasin' all over the hills with that pack of hounds."

"Ben, I didn't mean to drag you and the wife into this." Lew paused. "You ever

see a hunted animal down to its last breath and done for, and still wanting to run . . . and you wished you could give it time out, a breathing spell, no matter who the hunter was?". He added slowly, "When he runs again, he'll be on his own."

"Hell," said Alvord disgustedly, and in his tone was the memory of all the contented years he and his wife had worked for Mitchell. "I was thinking of you. You're the boss; you know that."

CHAPTER THREE

"Don't Nobody Move!"

MITCHELL came out of the Drover's Bank a few days later and unexpectedly ran into Bill Tarrant and Sheila. The old man's greeting seemed indifferent, and Sheila definitely held herself aloof, while Lew talked casually about stock and weather with her father. Then Tarrant said, suddenly chiding, "We missed you the other night. You left awfully early for a latecomer."

"Maybe those who come too late should have the grace to leave early." Mitchell looked at the girl.

"That's a negative statement. What would you say, Sheila?"

"I have no opinion in the matter, Dad." She turned with a motion, indicating that she wanted to leave.

Clark Younger came up the street toward the town office, saw the group on the sidewalk and at once swung his horse toward the rail and dismounted. Sheila greeted the deputy animatedly, and immediately a lash of jealous rage cut through Mitchell. Younger appeared too casually happy as he leaned against the rail and bantered with father and daughter. Bill Tarrant said, "And how goes the wild-goose chase?"

"Oh, maybe not so wild." The lean, handsome face swiveled to Mitchell. "By the by, Lew; we found that whisky bottle you dropped . . . up on the ridge north of the little valley. Strange place to find it."

Mitchell felt his face stiffen and fought to speak with easy brightness, "Anything in it?"

"Nary a drop."

"Haw," said Tarrant, "so that's the reason you lost the bottle that day," but no one laughed. Younger continued casually. "We had the hounds up there. Trail petered out, though. Didn't have much luck beyond the ridge. Scent was pretty hot before."

"You wouldn't get a scent," said Tarrant scornfully. "The whole thing is wild. That far from home? Those damn hounds would pick up anything and make a fuss. An empty whiskey bottle! Clark, you better turn in your badge and look after your ranching."

Younger said, still smiling, "Maybe, maybe . . ."

The group broke up then. The Tarrants going up to Tucker House for lunch with Younger, Mitchell begging off, seeing no invitation on Sheila's face. He stared after her, thinking, *Pride, pride? Was that all I loved?* Turning, he bumped into Ben Alvord.

"What's this about a bottle, Lew?"

They walked down the street, and the old man said pensively, "We burned his clothes and you carried him from the spot on your horse. If Clark's got half a suspicion and he's laying two and two together . . . but maybe he's not. Maybe we worry about nothing. One thing is sure, though: The man doesn't love you. That damned bottle. Takes only a little thing like that. . . ."

The image of Younger and Sheila together ate into Mitchell. Could men like Younger always sense a former jailbird? Some men could. Ben was saying, "Now is the time to get rid of him; let him make his run; turn him in, or what you will. Think of yourself, man." He took a sudden hold of Mitchell's arm. "Get him off your conscience. Say he was sick, which is true, and get clear of the thing. Why har-

bor an escaped criminal? That's a federal offense. How do you know you're doing the right thing?"

The right thing? Mitchell's face hardened. Their steps sounded together on the boards. He said slowly, "It ain't always in the books, Ben. . . ."

He found Hepburn in the kitchen, helping Mrs. Alvord, and beckoned him into the front room. "I want to talk to you . . ."

"I wanted to talk to you too, Mr. Mitchell. I got something on my mind."

"Yes?"

"Well, I kind of decided I don't want to make a run for it."

Mitchell started. "You want to give yourself up?"

"No sir! But I been thinkin' it's no use running. If you could keep me on a while longer, I'd work around the ranch. I'd earn my keep all right, wrangling the horses, doing the chores, anything. You could maybe bring me in someday, like I hadn't been here before and let on you were hiring a new hand." He shrugged and made a wide gesture. "It'd be kind of a start. It's a lot to ask, but if you'd take me on, I'd never let you down. . . ."

Hepburn's glance hung on Mitchell, his whole future seemingly in his eyes, as Mitchell said with great difficulty, "I don't reckon you'd let me down, Hepburn; and I want to keep you around. But . . ." He made a frustrated gesture, "it may be too late." As he went on, a slight sobbing sound came from the doorway where Mamie Alvord had been eavesdropping.

Hepburn was changed at once, electrified. "I guess that's how the cards fall," he said with a short laugh. "I got no time to lose then. Could you spare me a horse, a hat, and maybe an old pair of boots? My mother was supposed to have some distant relatives near Landers, Wyoming. They might let me hole up there for a while. It's a chance. . . ."

When Ben came in, Mitchell said, "That heavy-barrelled bay in the new bunch, Ben; there's only a roadbrand on it; the one with the white sock . . . and find an old work saddle."

"How about this?" Hepburn pulled up his trouser leg, showing the shackle.

They got the small anvil into the kitchen; Mrs. Alvord packed food for four days. The horse stood saddled and with a heavy blanket on the cantle, outside the kitchen. Hepburn held the chisel, Mitchell swung the hammer. The steel was stubborn; it took a dozen jarring blows before the heavy rivets parted. When the shackle was pried apart and fell, Alvord took Hepburn by the shirt and shook him close. "Never get Lew in trouble over you, or I'll kill you. You savvy?"

"Ben!" said his wife.

The youngster, when he had donned an old coat of Mitchell's, looked around from face to face. He came to Mitchell at last. "I won't never forget. You won't hear about me, ever!"

"I believe you," said Mitchell. "*Vaya con Dios.*"

Alvord said, "You best get going."

At this moment the kitchen door opened against the darkness outside, and Sheila Tarrant stood in the lamplight. The men whirled in their tracks. It took Mitchell several seconds to say, gravely questioning, "Will you come in?"

She came in then, somewhat pale and breathless and closed the door behind her and stood there, her eyes going from the shackle on the floor to Hepburn, to Mitchell. She seemed completely changed and upset. Alvord said quietly, with a taint of accusation, "Are you alone? I didn't hear your horse, Miss Tarrant." An instant blush came to her cheeks.

"I left it in the grove and walked up the lane." There was some embarrassment in the way she nodded. Mitchell, stunned by her sudden appearance, said at last, somberly, "Well, Sheila?"

She spoke then rapidly, abruptly, yet with a certain reluctance. "Clark kept hint-

ing and hunting during lunch. I didn't at first get the drift, or know whether he was joking or not. He and Dad had a few drinks. He didn't say anything directly, but he did say that he *could* have a man's house searched if he thought it was warranted. . . . I didn't understand at first, but later I somehow came to think of the whisky bottle he had found. . . ." She stopped and glanced at Hepburn quickly, then back at Mitchell. "I had to find out, don't you see? I wanted to know . . . to make sure. . . ."

"So now you know." Mitchell felt himself turn to ice. "Does it matter . . . ?"

"Don't misunderstand, Lew. . . ."

Hepburn had been glancing from Mitchell to Sheila, a strange alert understanding lighting his face. Now he suddenly sidestepped and lifted the gun from Ben Alvord's holster with one swift, flowing movement. He was at the door then with the cocked pistol, pushing the girl aside. "Over there, Miss. Don't nobody move! Don't nobody move!" The weapon pointed at the two men. "It's time to travel." His glance bored into Mitchell's. "I ain't forgetting." Then he looked briefly at Mamie Alvord and there was a tiny catch in his voice. "Bye, Ma'am; there's thirty years of hell waiting for me on the wrong side of the mountains. Don't stir till I'm in the saddle, folks!"

As he opened the door behind him, the pistol spoke with shocking accuracy, its bullet ripping across the muscle of Mitchell's upper left arm, staggering him back against the kitchen sink. "Don't stir now. Don't nobody follow!"

Hepburn fired again from the saddle, twice; through the open door and through the window, breaking the glass, being careful to aim at the ceiling; then, as he spurred the horse away he threw the pistol with a clatter onto the porch flooring. In another moment he was merely a galloping echo up the back trail beyond the pasture.

The cook, and the two riders who were home, came running from the bunkhouse across the yard. "What happened? Anybody hurt?"

Alvord said from the porch, "Man came in here with a gun and got himself a fresh horse. Boss got a scratch, that's all."

After a short confabulation, one of the men started to get ready to ride for the sheriff. Mitchell stood for a long time outside the kitchen, a kerchief around the wound, staring into the night. "He left the pistol," he thought. "He could have taken it; but he left it." He said a silent prayer. Could it be wrong for a man to run, if he went straight? *He* had gone straight. . . . Eventually he went back inside, and the two women dressed the wound.

BEN said afterwards, "Mamie, I reckon we could use some coffee."

"Yes, surely, coffee," his wife said absentmindedly, and the tears suddenly came to her eyes as she put away the cold lunch pack, which Hepburn had left in his haste.

The coffee was drunk in uncomfortable silence. Mrs. Alvord tried to make conversation with Sheila Tarrant, but her efforts somehow foundered. Presently Mitchell rose. "Ben, if you'll tell Harry to get the team hitched, I'll take Miss Tarrant home. . . ."

They were all looking at the girl, wondering. "There is no hurry," Sheila said. "I . . ." She dropped her hands listlessly.

Mitchell went into the long front room and paced up and down before the fire. In the kitchen, the women cleared away the coffee things, their shy voices mingling now and again with the soft clatter of china. After a long while Sheila stood in the doorway. "Lew, I wanted to explain . . ."

He turned; but now there was the racket of riders in the backyard, and he heard Ben call out to someone. With hammering heart he brushed past the girl and went to the kitchen. Had they already caught up . . . ?

Clark Younger and Stevens and a state deputy came in, Younger's eyes going over

the kitchen and the people in it in a somehow frantic search. He had the appearance of a man who senses he has come too late. "You had some trouble? We met your man on the road . . . ." The three men looked at Mitchell's arm, at the shattered window pane, at the bullet holes. Ben Alvord's voice drawled on, "Came in here out of the dark and held a gun on Mamie and Lew, while I got him a horse. We were unarmed . . . didn't have much choice. He wanted food . . ."

Mrs. Alvord had tossed the shackle into the stove; the little anvil was behind the wood box. Younger paced up and down like a puma nosing for scent, anger and frustration boiling in him; but his prodding questions fell away from Mitchell's and Alvord's stolid answers, and the evidence of the wound and the bullet holes, like waves against rocks.

Eventually, somehow, it was over, and Stevens turned to Younger with a slight show of impatience. "Well, best thing to do now is to start tracking him. Make the telegraph talk when you get back to town."

They were gone then, and Ben Alvord was saying, "Made a liar out of me, Lew. I don't know . . . takes quite a man to do that." He shrugged his head darkly and left the room.

Mitchell was then startled by the sudden realization that during all this Sheila had remained in the front room, never letting her presence be known. He found her by the fire, a new enigma staring quietly up at him. She spoke in a voice he did not quite know: "Perhaps you should tell me about this, Lew. You made a liar of me, too."

He went to the window and looked again out into the dark, his thoughts distances and years away. Abruptly, tersely, he began to talk. When he was through, he knew, he had lost her forever. "Fifteen years," he was saying. "I'd be getting out of jail just about now. I was a kid, a green kid. A prison like that does things to a man, and they don't come under the heading of improvements. Cattle stealing. Yes, I killed a man too. No, not murder. It was either him or me." He paused to look at her and almost smiled. "I know that's what they all say; but it's true. Stumbling on Hepburn was like finding myself. I had to help him. I had to believe that I should help him. Well, some things a man couldn't change if he tried; that's the way I am." He finished with a sigh. "Now you know. I was going to tell you anyhow, if it ever came to that . . ."

He moved toward the doorway. "I'll see to it that the team is ready."

Her voice startled him, turning him. "I wouldn't want you to change, Lew." She *was* changed, suddenly more mature and serious than he had ever seen her. Gone was the haughtiness. "I guess it takes more than dancing and laughter and silly pride to know a man. I . . . I never thought it would be quite like this. When Clark kept on hinting and hinting and making his remarks, I suddenly knew I wouldn't ever want anything to happen to you. . . ."

Unbelievingly he moved toward her as she stood up. "You mean,' he began. "You mean . . ."

"Didn't you wonder at all why I came over?" she said. ● ● ●

Statement required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933 and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), showing the Ownership, Management, and Circulation of New Western Magazine, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1952. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Henry Steeger; Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 7th day of October, 1952. Eugene Jelinek, Notary Public, State of New York. Qualified in Bronx County. No. 03-1962300. Certificate filed in Bronx and N. Y. counties. My Commission expires March 30, 1953. (Seal)—Form 3526—Rev. 8-50.

BOOTHILL

Deveraux threw himself flat. . . .

VACATION . .

By FRANCIS AMES

A bullet-riddled rancher, old Sam Colderman, didn't have much to laugh about. . . . But he died with a bushwhack slug in his belly, and a smile on his face!

BAKING in the mid-morning sun was a small, squatty town, on a sage and gumbo flat. There was a woman in the town that Art Deveraux had ridden north, from Wyoming into Montana, to see. Perhaps she could explain why Sam Colderman had left his Shawnee land to a man he hardly knew, hadn't seen in ten years. *It doesn't particularly matter,* Deveraux told himself. *I'm just a bit curious.*

Deveraux saw the name he was looking for emblazoned on the window of a cafe in Shawnee's main drag. He dismounted before it.

A big-shouldered man with tired eyes and a marshal's star leaned against the hitch rack, staring at him. "I'd just as soon you rode on, mister," he said. "You look too limber for this town."

"Go dig a hole for yourself, John Law," Deveraux told him, and walked around him to enter the cafe.

He ordered a full meal. The waitress smiled at him as she took the order. She had nice eyes, dark and a bit wise, and they stirred a man's blood. The cook's cap she wore and the stiffly starched apron, enveloped her completely so that Deveraux speculated pleasantly for a second, and shoved it from his mind. This was strictly a business trip.

After Deveraux had finished eating, he carefully rolled a cigarette and scratched a match on his boot heel. He spoke to the woman over the flame. "You're Brenda Littlefield. I'm Art Deveraux, from Wyoming. I want to know why Sam Colderman left me his land. I scarcely knew him."

Brenda leaned on the counter, studying his face, her eyes interested. "I've been expecting you," she said, and she turned and took off apron and cap. "I'll be out a while, Ida. Take care of things while I'm gone."

Brenda came around the counter, and Deveraux stood up. Without the apron and cap he noticed that she was slim, well-turned, mature, and that she had brown hair coiled in braids.

Marshal Harlow Trent was watching the alley when they emerged and mounted the back stairs to Brenda's apartment above. A look of complete astonishment came to his face as he watched them go to her apartment.

Deveraux entered the apartment. It was a dim, comfortably-furnished place, overlooking the street. He felt cautious—Brenda Littlefield behind a counter in apron and cap was an entirely different proposition than she was in an apartment without them. It occurred to Deveraux that this small-town waitress had suddenly changed into a personable and perhaps dangerous woman.

"Have a drink," she said, and poured one, motioning him to a chair. She sat in another chair. The light from the window slanted across her hair.

"You were saying," she said, "that Colderman left you his place."

"You know he did," Deveraux countered, "You witnessed his will."

"Of course," she told him. "He asked me to, three months before he was killed."

"Killed!" he exclaimed. "I was told that he accidentally shot himself, while sitting in a chair cleaning his rifle."

"I'm the only one," she said, and her eyes grew angry, "that will tell you differently. He was murdered. And you'll do well, Mr. Deveraux, to watch your back while you're here. Hart Aldendorf, of Flying Fork, and Tom Bannister, of Boxed B, both want that land. Badly."

"Not so fast, lady," Deveraux growled. "What proof do you have that Colderman was murdered?"

She got up and walked to the window, silhouetted there.

"A woman," she said, "doesn't need proof where one she loves is concerned. Sam Colderman was like a father to me, after my parents died."

"I'm sorry," he said and went to stand beside her, still distrustful. "But why did he leave the land to *me?*"

"That," she told him, looking up at him, "is what I brought you up here to find out."

THERE was sadness in her face, a sorrow that brought tears to her eyes, and Deveraux steeled himself, knowing the power of a woman's tears and the trickery for which they were so often used.

"So," he said bluntly, "Colderman was your friend, and you *think* he was murdered. What has that to do with me?"

"He was an old man," she said, "who had wandered all of his life, who wanted only to sit down somewhere in peace. He filed on cactus and gumbo land. It was worthless for graze, yet it held water that both Flying Fork and Boxed B wanted. They tried to buy him out. When he wouldn't sell they hounded him, and finally killed him. I'm sure of it. Now you tell me why he left the land to you. Just how well did you know him?"

"Only slightly," he said, thinking back ten years. "He was the bull cook for Mill Iron in the Mill Iron-Walking Z range war. He was a little, old man, who didn't say much. I was called in on the war and saw him around. Can't recall ever speaking to him."

She was looking at him strangely now, and he knew what she was thinking. She was thinking the same thing that Marshal Harlow Trent had thought when he asked him to ride on through town. Dressed almost fastidiously in black trousers, leather jerkin, ivory harness ring snugging a silk kerchief about his muscular neck, and with a single Colt slung low on his hip, Deveraux had the look of a man born to trouble. His profile was angular, his nose long and his cheek bones prominent. His gray, deep-set eyes, the loose hang of his arms, and a suggestion of toughness in his stride had scared the marshal.

"So," Brenda said slowly, "you were called in on a range war. Perhaps you are a man that makes a business of being called into range wars, and other fights. Perhaps, Mr. Deveraux, an old man might carry the picture of a hero in his mind, like a kid, and remember him when he dies."

He thought about it, and it didn't make sense. Not in the way she had presented it. Yet in another way, it might be true. He looked back to that awful day when his strategy for Mill Iron had lured Walking Z into a trap. Had Sam Colderman, knowing he was soon to be killed, willed his land to a man who was known for his cunning and who might come and win over Colderman's enemies after his death? It was an ironic thought, and its irony showed in Deveraux's face.

"Hero hell!" he said explosively. "Cold-

erman might have left me the land, hoping I'd raise Cain with Aldendorf and Bannister. If he did, it was a weakling's dream."

"I went out to the cabin as soon as I heard," she said slowly. "He had a smile on his face when he died. I wondered why. Now I know."

"Why," he asked, "did he smile? A man with a slug in his belly ain't got much to grin over."

"Because," she said, "he knew that in dying he'd out-foxed them. He knew you'd come, ask questions, right the wrong done him. Whatever you may be in real life, you were a knight in shining armor to Sam."

"Hell!" he exclaimed impatiently. "I'll take a look at this place, estimate its worth, sell to the highest bidder and scram."

"Good day, Mr. Deveraux," she said, and she handed him his hat, her lips curling with scorn.

He strode out angrily, cursing a woman's wiles beneath his breath. He went down the alley and around to the street where his gray was tied before the cafe. He had a boot in the stirrup when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

"If you're Deveraux, from Wyoming," the man said, "I'll have a word with you."

"You guessed it," Deveraux said, keeping his foot in the stirrup, brushing the hand from his arm. "Talk, but keep your mitts to yourself. Who the hell are you?"

"Pete Romel, foreman of Tom Bannister's Boxed B. Bannister wants to see you in Wally's Bar."

The man was of Deveraux's height, yellow haired, stormy eyed.

"Tell Bannister," Deveraux said, and he swung up, swiveling the gray around so that Romel was forced to step back, "that when I want him I'll send for him."

Deveraux looked down at Romel, seeing an anger come into his face, and the glitter in the almost yellow eyes indicated that here was a man primed to kill him. The realization angered Deveraux, and he put spurs to the gray, intent on either running the man down or forcing him to jump to avoid being run down. The man yelled as he jumped, and Deveraux rode around the corner. He headed due north, following the instructions given him by Colderman's lawyer, to locate the land the old man had left him.

The place, covered with gumbo and sage and cactus, was not worth a damn except for the scattered mud holes in the high-banked creek. Glancing over the place, the story was easy to read. There were no cattle on this sun-burned, bitter land, but in the grassy hills on either side there were plenty. Boxed B brands grazed to the east, and Flying Fork was to the west. As the sun lowered, these cattle would stream down out of the hills, frantic for water, their bellies full of dry grass. The leaders would be pushed out into the mud by the trailers. In late evening, as the sun brought purple shadows to the dusty sage, this spot would swarm with riders of both factions, pulling bogged beef out of the mud-holes. There wasn't enough water here to see both herds through to fall rain. The outfit that lost Colderman water would have to ship out, cut down herds.

Deveraux could see now why Romel, as ramrod of Boxed B, was eager to find opportunity to kill him. With Deveraux out of the way, the two outfits could fight it out. Bannister, no doubt, was the stronger and felt confident of winning. Maybe, after all, Colderman had met foul play. Deveraux swiveled the gray toward the one-room shack that stood in the shade of the only tree in sight, a gnarled cottonwood.

DEVERAUX stood in the middle of the one room, staring at an old man's pitiful belongings: faded overalls on a nail, bat wing chaps with a hole at the knee, rusted traps in a corner, tin dishes, scanty supplies. There was one chair, with a bullet hole in the back, a cleaning rod and can of gun oil beside it. A reddish-black trail of

dried blood led from the chair to the bunk against the wall. The blankets were covered with blood stains.

Deveraux attempted to bring a clear picture of Sam Colderman to his mind but found he could not, and it bothered him. Here he sat, there he crawled, and there he kicked the bucket, with a bullet in his belly and a smile on his face. A hell of a way to die!

Deveraux examined the thirty-thirty saddle rifle that someone had placed on the bunk. He traced the bullet through the back of the chair to the wall, dug it out and examined it closely. *I may smell to high heaven,* he thought, *but it's barely possible that I ain't the worst skunk on this prairie.*

Riding toward Shawnee late in the afternoon, he thought of Brenda Littlefield and wondered what she had wanted, expected him to do. *She and that short-horned marshal picked me for a gun-shark. I was never that in my best days, and now I'm thirty-two. A man slows up. But no one ever called me dumb. This thing is open-and-shut. Get Bannister and Aldendorf together, bidding against each other, sell out to one of them before some character slips a slug between my shoulder blades. Call it a vacation with pay and ride back to Wyoming. A sweet deal.*

In Shawnee he stabled his roan, got a room at the hotel, and wrote a letter in the lobby. As he went up the street to the post office, he saw Pete Romel leaning against the front of Wally's Bar, trying to look unconcerned but doing a poor job of it. He returned to the hotel after posting the letter, stretched his bone-weary frame on the bed, and wondered how long it would be before Bannister showed, and where Aldendorf was. There had been Flying Fork branded broncs before the Shawnee Saloon across the street. Boxed B seemed to be holed up in Wally's Bar.

Aldendorf showed first, within the hour. He pushed into the room without knocking, a square-built man, constructed like a cedar post. A black cigar cocked solidly in his jaw.

"You're Deveraux, I hear," he said sourly. "I know what you're here for. How much for the Colderman land? I'm Aldendorf of the Flying Fork."

Deveraux swung his boots to the floor and smiled. "Do I look stupid," he said. "We'll talk price when Bannister shows."

"Bannister, hell!" Aldendorf yelled. "You can't blackmail me, Bannister or no Bannister. Monkey around with Flying Fork, and you'll find yourself up a creek without a paddle!"

"Fool around with me," Deveraux countered, "and Flying Fork won't have a creek!"

Boot heels pounded down the hall, and Romel barged into the room, accompanied by a man who was amazingly tall, ridiculously thin—a bony man with a sad, lantern-jawed face.

"What goes on here?" he demanded of nobody in particular, his voice high, thin and piping.

"Bannister, I suppose," Deveraux said tartly. "Now that I've got all the snakes in one room, let's have bids on the Colderman land. What do I hear?"

"How you do run on, boy," Bannister said. "Two thousand."

"Three," Aldendorf countered, as though he were biting off nails.

"Five," Bannister said.

"Six!"

"Hold on, now, Aldendorf," Bannister piped, and his eyes grew cunning. "You and me will be bidding ourselves out of house and home. Let's handle this differently."

"What do you suggest?" Aldendorf's eyes grew wary.

"Trent tells me this monkey is a gun slick from Wyoming. He wouldn't be a'tall surprised if he got mean on us and we had to take steps. Hell, shoot the hombre and be done with it."

"Where'd that put us?"

"A good question, son," Deveraux said.

"Back where we were," Bannister's skinny hands hung close to the guns he wore. "We don't need no Wyoming gents in this game."

"Sure!" Pete Romel shifted aside, putting Deveraux in position to be vulnerable to cross fire. "The coyote tried to run me down this morning."

A clammy fear crawled up Deveraux's spine. He forced himself to smile, cock a knee between his clasped hands, lean back on the bed in comfort.

"Too bad," he said flatly. "It won't work. You made your mistake when you took it for granted that Colderman hadn't made a will. Don't make the same mistake twice. I mailed my will this afternoon, to a Wyoming lawyer. If I die, the land goes to the Grassy Butte Cattle Company, on the Tongue. Where does that leave you, gentlemen?"

They knew where it left them. High and dry. You could see it in their faces. Grassy Butte Cattle was a grasping, ruthless outfit. Let them get wise to the setup here, and they'd move in and pick the bones of Flying Fork and Boxed B clean. They were big enough to do it.

"I'm worth," Deveraux reminded them, "more to you gents alive. Don't forget it."

Romel had his hand on his gun, the urge to kill on his face.

"How you do run on, boy," Bannister croaked, his eyes baffled. He dropped one of his claw-like hands on Romel's gun wrist. "Cut it, Romel," he said.

Six thousand dollars, Deveraux thought, *is a lot of money. Take it and skin out, while you've got 'em stopped. If a man has to die with a bullet in his belly, why does he have to smile? It ain't natural.*

"I'm still talking," Deveraux said, and his voice grew harsh. "Sam Colderman didn't shoot himself accidentally. He was murdered. I want the killer. The outfit that brings him to me, dead or alive, with proof of his guilt, gets the land at six thousand. I'll give you until morning. If nothing happens by morning, I take the story and a bargain to Grassy Butte Cattle. Both of you birds, then, had better start hunting holes."

"You're a damned liar," Romel yelled, and he lunged at Deveraux.

Sitting on the bed, Deveraux lifted a boot, placed it in Romel's belly and kicked. The burly foreman of Boxed B landed on his back in the corner, retching, looking into the muzzle of Deveraux's Colt.

"How you do run on, boy," Bannister croaked, and he didn't move a muscle. "Of course, the death was an accident. Everyone knows that. Colderman was cleaning his rifle, sitting in a chair. Bullet went through his gut and through the back of the chair."

"And," Deveraux told him bitingly, "through the chair back, into the wall. You birds ride this range with so high a hand that you don't even try to cover your tracks. Colderman couldn't have shot himself while cleaning his rifle. The slug that killed him wasn't a rifle slug. It was a forty-five. I dug it out of the wall and put it in my pocket. Now get out of here before I get mad."

Aldendorf went first, a dazed look on his face. Romel followed, sidling out of the room with murderous eyes on Deveraux. Bannister looked down with eyes hard to read.

"You told Trent," Bannister asked, "about this?"

"Not yet," Deveraux said, "but don't worry. I will."

"Hah!" Bannister grunted. "How you do run on, boy."

He went out of the room, a ridiculously tall man, walking with short, mechanical steps on pipe stem legs. Deveraux shuddered.

IT WAS a devilish plan that Deveraux had concocted to confuse Sam Colderman's enemies. Standing by the window,

looking down on the street, he wondered why he'd bothered. *Habit, I guess,* he told himself. *It's a bad habit. Could get a man killed.*

Only one of these two outfits could be guilty of killing Colderman, for they obviously didn't operate together. The innocent party by a process of elimination knew who did it. To get the Colderman land, keep Grassy Butte Cattle out of the deal, they had to get that man, prove it and bring the culprit to Deveraux. On the other hand, the guilty party, or parties, would have to watch their backs and protect themselves. This thing was apt to begin to boil before morning. When the action started, Deveraux expected to take over. Perhaps Colderman had reason to smile.

Deveraux was thinking about it, watching darkness come to the street below, wondering when the break would come and how, when Brenda Littlefield knocked on his door. He admitted her, surprised that she had come to him at this hour. A small-town woman always fears small-town gossip. She doesn't come to a man's hotel room at night without a woman's reasons under her bonnet.

"I came in the back way," she said, as though reading his thoughts. "No one saw me. Which outfit did you sell out to?"

He told her about it, and she stood beside him, listening until he finished. "That's the way you wanted it," he said at the end.

"No!" she exclaimed, and her eyes were frightened. "I wanted Sam's killer punished, even killed. But not this way. Can't you see what you've done? They're not all guilty. Flying Fork and Boxed B will go to war. Innocent men will be hurt; boys that come to my place to eat."

She grasped his arms, swung him around with a strength that he had not thought possible in so slender a woman. "What kind of a man are you, Art Deveraux?" she cried. "A gunman? I accepted you as that. But a gunman faces his man, kills or is killed. You scheme while you sulk in a hotel room, plot to have others do your fighting for you."

He twisted her about, pulled her against him, bent his head toward her lips. She strained away, covering her lips with a hand.

"Don't tease me, Art," she said. "I'm not in the mood. When you do, mean it."

He released her, knowing she meant what she said, feeling foolish and totally inadequate. She didn't move away from him. Together they watched Harlow Trent move down the street below, lighting the street lamps.

"He's a sound man, Art," she said.

"I figured he was. You'd better go now, Brenda."

"I don't understand you," she said, and her voice was worried. "I can't believe that you're a coward."

"Don't call the game, Brenda," he told her, "until the cards are all down. Get out of here now, and don't come back."

She hesitated, looked at him queerly, touched his arm with lingering fingers, and then she was gone. He listened to her footsteps moving down the hall toward the back steps.

He looked out of the window and saw Boxed B come out of Wally's Bar below, mount as one man and ride out with Bannister, ridiculously tall in the saddle, at the lead. They had hardly had time to clear town when Flying Fork appeared outside the Shawnee Saloon across the street. Aldendorf swung heavily into the saddle, waved a meaty hand to the tight group of riders about him, and followed Bannister into the darkness. He was thinking about it when a shot boomed out in the street.

He saw a tall figure emerge from the post office, a mail sack in his hand, and Deveraux knew instantly that the wall he had built to protect his life had been removed. That mail sack undoubtedly contained the letter that he had so carefully told them he had mailed to his lawyer, willing the land to Grassy Butte Cattle.

MARSHAL TRENT ran heavily toward the postoffice, gun in hand. A shadowy figure stationed at the alley lifted a hand and flame stabbed at the running officer. Trent halted in mid-stride, spun about, went down. Deveraux rammed his Colt barrel through the window glass, fired at the man in the alley. He yelled as he ducked into cover.

Deveraux went down the stairs three at a time. He ran through the lobby, seeing the clerk's startled face. He catapulted across the street, leaping the marshal's body, into the alley. Flame lanced at him from behind a garbage barrel. Deveraux threw himself flat and rapidly triggered two shots at the barrel. The man behind it jerked upright, took two faltering steps, fell flat on his face.

Deveraux leaped upon him, stooped swiftly and rolled him over, stepping on an extended gun wrist to guard against trickery. It was Pete Romel.

"A doctor," Romel groaned. "Get me to a doctor. Quick!"

"Who killed Colderman?" Deveraux asked mercilessly. "Out with it, Romel, or I leave you here to bleed."

Romel's eyes were wide with death-fear.

"Bannister," he said. "Get me to a doctor, Deveraux. A doctor. In God's name! I'm dying!"

Deveraux slipped his arms beneath the Boxed B foreman's shoulders. Deveraux had lifted him, when he saw the ladder-like figure standing in the alley's entrance, the mail sack drooping in one hand.

"Shut up, Romel," Bannister said, and he fired point blank, flinging the sack into the alley before him.

Deveraux felt the slug hit Romel, and the man went limp in his arms. He dropped him and rolled into the dark shadows of the brick wall of the Shawnee Saloon. He lay there hugging the ground, realizing that he had but two shots remaining between himself and Bannister, wishing he'd picked up Romel's gun.

Bannister lunged into the light, and then he walked toward Deveraux, taking short, slow steps. At every step twin flames stabbed at Deveraux from Bannister's guns. The alley was a bedlam of thunderous reports, the eerie screech of lead ricocheting from the wall.

Deveraux fell to his knees and triggered off his last shot. The slug spun Bannister around. He dropped one gun but still came on, firing the other. Deveraux felt a ripping sear of pain across his scalp. His face smashed into the dirt of the alley. He fought to get up, to clear the blood from his eyes.

"How you do run on, boy," Bannister said from close at hand. "Grassy Butte Cattle, hah! We fooled you, Deveraux. Me and Romel sent the boys home, sneaked back and grabbed off the mail sack. Your letter ain't going anywhere."

Deveraux could barely make out Bannister's figure through the blood in his eyes, the dizzy whirl of his head. He fought to retain consciousness. The muzzle of Bannister's gun pointed down.

"You ain't leaving no will, boy," Bannister taunted. "Tell Sam Colderman I sent you."

His thin laughter cackled in the alley. With Flying Fork out of town, Harlow Trent down, Boxed B owned the place.

"Drop it, Bannister," Brenda Littlefield warned. "I've got a shotgun on your back."

She was standing in the alley's entrance, holding a shotgun leveled at Bannister. Deveraux realized that if she fired the buckshot would get him, too.

"Plug him, Brenda!" Deveraux yelled. "He killed Sam!"

Bannister cursed as he twisted about, then sensing Deveraux's quick movement, twisted back and fired. Deveraux felt the slug rip along his ribs as he swung the long barrel of his Colt between Bannister's eyes with all his remaining strength. Then his face was in the alley's dirt again.

(Continued on page 110)

With a sickening crunch of lead on bone, Gus slumped forward. . . .

By A. C. ABBOTT

A NICE NECK FOR A NOOSE!

In the dim light he saw the noose looping down from the limb. . . . Then he felt a friendly arm about his shoulders. . . .

PECOS RYAN pulled his horse to a halt and stepped to the ground, feeling carefully with his foot in the inky blackness. He thumbed a match, grunting softly to himself as the flickering light revealed a narrow hoof-marked trail.

"We goin' the right way?" said Curly Davis, Pecos' bow-legged, blue-eyed pard-

ner. "This short cut was only s'posed to be three miles long but, by golly, I think we've come ten already."

"Feels like it, all right," Pecos admitted, "but we've still got a trail of some kind under us."

The match winked out, and Pecos reached a big sinewy hand for tobacco, shaping a cigarette deftly by feel. It was comparatively early in the evening, and the moon had not risen.

"Blacker'n the inside of a Black Angus cow," Curly snorted in disgust. "Where all at do you reckon that Bench K outfit is?"

Pecos lit his cigarette; and, while the match still burned in his right hand, he raised the left with all five fingers spread, gesturing broadly toward the east.

"Right over thataway," he drawled confidently.

Again Curly snorted. "Let's line out on that middle finger and go to trottin'. I ain't eaten for three weeks."

"Hang onto your appetite, cowboy," Pecos advised coolly as he remounted and started forward. "If that bartender in Clearwater was wrong about the Bench K hirin', we may not eat for another three weeks. Wonder what this country looks like in daylight?"

"Don't matter," Curly retorted. "If it's got cows that need nursin' and men willin' to pay for it, it can look like the tag end of a bad stampede for all I care. I'm *hungry.*"

"You're always hungry," Pecos drawled without sympathy. "Now dry up, so my horse can think about where he's puttin' his feet."

Another half mile of stumbling progress brought them to the edge of a large clearing in the trees. Ahead of them loomed lighted windows, the vague bulk of ranch buildings. The two tired horses displayed new vigor as they threaded their way through the thinning brush.

Pecos drew a deep thankful breath that stuck in his throat as a harsh yell sounded from the ranch house, followed by a slamming door. Instinctively he jerked his horse to a halt. He heard the pound of running hoofs directly ahead of him, saw the blare of light as a door was thrown open to reveal a man putting a rifle to his shoulder. Pecos saw, fleetingly, a wink of light from the rifle, before a red hot sledgehammer took him on the side of the head, knocking him sideways in the saddle. His horse, snorting in fright, whirled out from under him.

From that point on, Pecos Ryan wasn't too sure of what happened. He connected with the ground solidly and, for a moment, was too stunned to move. The night seemed to have exploded into flashes of lightning, wild yells, drumming hoofs, but Pecos couldn't be sure how much of it was inside his own bursting head. He thought he heard the slide of gravel as running horses were pulled to a halt. Then came a hard impact of big bodies, and a grunting horse sailed over him to land crashing in the brush.

Dimly, as from a great distance, he heard Curly's voice ask, "That you, Pecos?"

"Get your hands up, cowboy," a gruff voice answered instantly. "Snare his gun, Bill, and let's get out of here."

"Hell!" grunted Curly angrily. "What's the idea?"

"Shut up!" the gruff voice hissed. "Line out ahead of us and keep your trap shut or I'll shut it for you, permanent."

The sound of horses faded quietly away into the blackness of the night as Pecos struggled to get up. His head was splitting, his arms and legs were too limber to be of any use. He cursed thickly, realizing that someone was running away with his pard while he clawed at the brush in vain, not hearing the approach of other horses from the direction of the ranch, not seeing the lantern light suddenly shining on him. He had just gained his hands and knees when someone grabbed him roughly and jerked him over onto his back. Painfully Pecos

blinked up at a grim brown face. Blinked up, too, at the round black muzzle of a gun.

"By God, you nailed one of 'em," someone said with satisfaction. "That was sure a lucky shot, Dave."

"Yeah." Dave, the young cowboy leaning over Pecos took the wounded man's gun and stuck it in his belt, then sheathed his own gun. His dark eyes flicked coldly over Pecos' long body, then came back to rest accusingly on the blood-streaked face.

Pecos closed his eyes, wondering what in hell had come off, listening to the babble of excited voices.

"Did they kill the old man?"

"He ain't dead, but he's bad hurt."

"What happened?" a newcomer demanded. "Everybody piled out of the bunkhouse so I just follered."

"Somebody robbed the old man. Dave walked in just as they were leavin'. Dammit! We can't even trail 'em in the dark."

"Well, we got one of 'em. The other one's got the money, but he won't get far with it."

"Gimme your rope, Gus," Dave said. "This jigger is just creased."

Pecos opened his eyes as a grizzled, bowlegged little cowboy stepped forward, rope in hand. Willing hands pulled Pecos to his feet, and, before he could summon strength enough to resist, his arms were lashed securely behind him.

"What'll we do with him?" someone asked, a challenge in his voice.

For answer Gus stepped to a nearby horse, twitched a rope off the saddle, and flipped out a small loop. Deftly he tossed it over Pecos' head and jerked it tight.

The feel of that rope, stiff and unyielding around his throat, cleared Pecos' head like a dash of icy water. With and effort he straightened up, forcing his long legs to hold steady under him. The right side of his dark head was sticky with blood, one trickle of which ran down over his pale face and dripped off his jaw. His gray eyes, however, were clear and level.

"I don't know," he said slowly, "just what you think I've done, but I haven't. I'm a stranger around here, lookin' for the Bench K."

"You found it." Gus laughed shortly. "Reckon that was your horse that got throwed. Fetch him over, boys, and we'll show this jigger how the Bench K operates."

"Damn right!" a cowboy agreed. "We'll hang the one we've got and get the other one later."

Pecos took an involuntary step backward but was shoved forward so hard he stumbled. He swore savagely.

"Wait!" Dave gripped Pecos' arm with steel fingers. "Where is your pard headin'?"

Pecos hesitated, his brain working feverishly. He and Curly had stopped in the town of Clearwater that evening on the empty-pocket end of a long drifting spree. They had waited, as they always did, until they were flat broke before seriously looking for a riding job. Now he realized clearly that the bartender who had advised them to try the Bench K would be able to identify Curly as the pard who'd been with him. If they could find Curly. Or if the bartender ever got another chance to look at Pecos.

He asked carefully, "What makes you think I've got a pard?"

"I saw two fellers go out the door just as I came into Old Man King's room," Dave said coldly. "I don't know how you found out he was expecting delivery of a herd tomorrow and had all that money in his safe, but you did. You damned coyote! Pistol-whippin' a crippled old man!"

"You've got the wrong hombre," Pecos said evenly. "I never saw Old Man King or the Bench K. I was comin' out here to see if I could get a punchin' job when I got run over in the dark."

"You're lyin'!"

"Sure, I'm lyin'," Pecos said acidly, "when I'm tied up and you're not."

Deliberately Dave pulled back an arm and planted a stinging backhanded slap

across Pecos' lips. An instant fury prompted Pecos to launch a kick at the cowboy, but he didn't connect. Gus "sat down" on the rope, and Pecos was jerked over backward. He went down heavily, kicking, twisting to loosen the rope that was cutting off his wind. Dave grabbed his shoulders and pulled him back to his feet, loosening the rope with a vicious yank.

"Where's your pard headin' for?" he asked again, coldly.

Pecos drew a long ragged breath, knowing he was was licked; but the gaze he bent on Dave was scornfully direct. "None of your damned business!"

THEN he was being boosted onto his horse, feeling the familiar smoothness of the saddle under him. The flickering lantern made grotesque shadows of the silent men as they led the horse back to a big oak tree. The rope was thrown over a limb; the slack was taken up. Pecos cocked one glance up at the overhanging limb, then looked searchingly around at the circle of grim-faced cowboys. Finally he looked back at Dave.

"You've still got the wrong hombre," he said quietly. "If you do find my pard, give him a chance to explain before you do this to him, will you?"

For the first time Dave seemed uncertain. He glanced questioningly at Gus, back at Pecos. "If you'll tell us where to find your pard, we'll take you into town and jail you instead of stringing you up."

"I don't know where you can find him," Pecos said frankly. "Last I know he was bein' herded down country with a gun in his back."

"Aw, hell!" Gus spat disgustedly. "Wallop that horse, somebody."

"Wait." Dave took a firm grip on the bridle, studying Pecos uncertainly. Finally he murmured hesitantly, "I wish Shag and Blackie would get back from town."

From what the bartender had said, Pecos knew that Shag Wilson was the foreman of the Bench K; and he said as much now. He added, "The bartender said Shag was hirin'. That's why we came out here. We just happened to get in front of those fellers that were tryin' to get away."

"Well, my God!" Gus exploded wrathfully. "Dave, you believe a yarn like that?"

"No," Dave said slowly, "I reckon I don't, but I'll be damned if I want to help hang the wrong man. Let's lock him up til we find that pard of his. Then, if his explanation is as thin as this one, we'll hang 'em both to the same tree."

There were growls and mutterings of dissent, but Dave obviously was a highly respected member of the outfit.

"Maybe they'll get away," someone objected lamely.

"They can't get away," Dave said flatly. "The country just isn't big enough to hide the fellers that pistol-whipped the old man!"

Less than an hour later Pecos Ryan felt like the prize specimen at a brand new zoo, two bits a look. The skinny little doctor came to dress his head and did an efficient job of stitching the wound even though he had to shove his spectacles up off the end of his nose three times during the operation. The burly, gray-mustached sheriff stood around looking important while the townsfolk crowded into the small jail to view the prisoner and offer comments. Those comments were anything but encouraging to the man with the forty-dollar headache.

"That's him," the red-faced bartender said emphatically. "I remember plain enough them askin' the way to the Bench K. The other feller's shorter, with blue eyes and straw colored hair. Broke they was. Too doggone broke to even buy a drink!"

"That other one ain't broke no more," growled Gus, "but his neck'll be broke when we catch him."

Dave asked quietly, "Did you tell 'em the old man was expectin' a herd?"

"Yeah, I did. Gosh, I never thought—"

Shag Wilson shouldered his way through the crowd, a tall, hard-faced cowman in his middle thirties. There was a malevolent gleam in the slate blue eyes he turned on Pecos.

"What'd you bring him to town for?" he asked harshly. "Trees along the trail all fallen down?"

"Take it easy, Shag," Dave advised coolly. "We don't want to make any mistakes. Where's Blackie?"

"Around somewhere," Shag answered shortly. "I broke a cinch on the way in and we just got here. Damn! I wish we'd been out there."

"Sure, you do," spoke up the doctor sympathetically. "We all know how you feel about Old Man King. He's been like a father to you."

"He's been like a dad to the whole blamed country," Dave said with restraint. "Ever since he got crippled in that fall, he's spent all his time figurin' out ways to help folks."

Shag swore thickly, glaring at Pecos with murderous intent.

"Hang onto yourself, Shag," the sheriff put in quickly. "We need some information out of this feller. He's goin' to tell us where we can pick up his pardner."

Shag Wilson ignored the sheriff, regarding the prisoner with the heartless eye of a buzzard. "How about it, drifter?" he barked.

Pecos was sitting on the edge of the bunk, fingering his bandaged head. Now he leaned back against the wall and rolled a cigarette with studied indifference. Finally he said coolly, "I don't where he is."

"Ran out on you, huh?" Shag laughed coldly. "That sounds likely. At least you can tell us where you think he'd go."

"It isn't a case of where I think he'd go," Pecos drawled. "It's a case of where those fellers would take him." He shrugged, having nothing further to impart.

"Listen, cowboy," Shag advised, his voice ringing hard. "Old Man King is a mighty fine man and my boss. There are plenty of ways to make a man talk, if you need to—"

Pecos grinned crookedly. "Any way to make a man tell somethin' he don't know?"

"Bah!" Gust shoved up to the bars beside Shag. "You know all right, and you'll tell us or, by God, you'll wish we'd hung you!"

"Come back in the mornin'," Pecos invited mildly. "I got a headache." With that, he stretched out on the cot with his face to the wall.

"Well, I'll be damned!" the sheriff exploded hotly. "He can't—"

"Get out of here," Shag ordered abruptly. "All of you, beat it. That feller belongs to the Bench K, and anybody who tries to touch him will hear from the outfit! Gus, get the keys. You stay here to watch him."

"And maybe you think I won't," Gus agreed belligerently.

Pecos listened to the boots tramp out of the corridor, through the sheriff's office and on outside. Then he sat up to look around. There were only four cells, two on each side of the short corridor. The back door loomed blackly in the dim light, bolted on the inside. The window above his cot was too small for him to crawl through, even if it had not been barred.

"You're here to stay," Gus said with a grin, "until somebody takes you out."

"Looks like it," Pecos agreed. He rolled another cigarette before lying down again to stare moodily at the ceiling. Trouble, he reflected grimly, was what he and Curly Davis always bumped into when they started looking for a job. Eager curiosity and a restless urge to see new range had led them into most parts of the vast cow country, working only long enough to get money for expenses. They'd had some wonderful times together.

"But someday," Pecos told himself sourly, "I'm a-gonna hang onto a job until it squeals for help."

Although he could maintain an air of cool indifference before the eyes of the crowd, he couldn't fool himself. He was

sick. To be accused of any robbery was bad enough. To be accused of pistol-whipping a kindly, crippled old man turned his stomach upside down. And he couldn't, as yet, see any possible way of clearing himself.

He wondered where those men had taken Curly and what had they done to him. He knew his good-natured pardner would get away from them if he were given any chance at all, but he might not be given a chance. He also knew that, if Curly did get away, he would come straight back to see what had happened to his pardner. And they'd both be hung from the same tree.

Pecos' unpleasant thoughts were interrupted by the faint creaking of a floorboard in the sheriff's office. He turned his head that way in time to see two shadowy figures appear in the door, guns glinting dully in their hands. Gus started out of his chair, an oath ripping from his lips as his hand darted toward his gun. One of the men leaped at him, his gun flashing up and then down. Pecos heard the sickening crunch of lead on bone, and Gus slumped forward without a sound.

The two men wore long slickers that hid their clothes. Both had wide-brimmed hats pulled low over their eyes, and their faces were masked with bandannas.

Pecos didn't like the setup at all. He knew beyond a doubt that these were the men who had stuck a gun in Curly's back, the robbers. Two men who had a trail to cover and could cover it by using two unknown cowboys. A "jailbreak" would be considered definite proof of guilt.

Pecos came slowly off the bunk, flexing his big hands in futility. He watched helplessly while the larger of the two men dragged the unconscious Gus over to the door of his cell and placed him on his back, feet toward the cell as if he'd fallen backward from a standing position. Then the man reached under his slicker to pull out a short hunting knife, the type that a man might easily conceal in his boot. With one swift downward slash of his arm, he ran the knife up to the hilt in Gus' chest.

Pecas stood rooted, trying to think but seeing only the black picture of a mighty short future. The charge against him now would be cold-blooded murder. He and Curly would be "caught" all right, but they'd never be brought in alive. Maybe Curly was already dead. A terrible curse formed in Pecos' throat but couldn't get past his tightly clenched teeth.

The smaller of the two men had unbolted the back door and returned to the cell by the time the killer had taken the keys from Gus and unlocked the door. He swung the door hard into Gus' body, shoving it aside a little.

"Come on out," he said gruffly.

"Come in and get me," Pecos retorted coldly, knowing they were going to kill him but hoping to make it hard for them.

He didn't have much luck. As the killer approached, gun in hand, Pecos lunged for him. However, he hadn't realized he was standing in a puddle of water spilled by the doctor. Now his boot slipped on the cement floor, throwing him forward in an awkward stumble. His groping hands fastened on the killer's gun wrist, but before he could regain his balance, the second robber leaped in from the side to bring the gun down hard on the back of his head. For the second time that night, Pecos Ryan witnessed a beautiful display of fireworks . . .

AS CONSCIOUSNESS returned to him, he became aware first of a continual rhythmic movement that he dully wished would stop. His head threatened to drop off his shoulders. He wanted to grab it with both hands and anchor it in one position, but he couldn't seem to find it. Gradually he understood that he lay face down across a trotting horse, with cutting ropes over his back lashing him to the saddle.

He swore thickly and tried to shift position. It was no use. His hands already

ached and burned from contact with sharp rocks and heavy brush. His dangling arms swung crazily with the movements of the horse, but Pecos let them swing. His head was the thing. He had thought it ached before, but he now decided he hadn't known at that time what a headache was.

"Pull up a minute, Bill," came the gruff voice of the killer.

The horses stopped, and Pecos stifled a sigh of relief. Above the breathing of the horses and the soft creaking of saddle leather, he could hear a wild uproar somewhere behind. He hadn't been out long, then. They were just a short distance from town, and already Gus' body had been discovered. Hope leaped up in Pecos, only to flicker and die out as he realized that any posse formed would be seeking him with only one idea in mind. He had looked forward to other moments in which he expected to die, but none of them had filled him with such helpless rage.

"Horses comin'," Bill said nervously.

"Let 'em come. They won't find us in the dark. As soon as we pick up that other feller and cover our trail, we'll go back and help 'em look."

The man laughed harshly. Pecos started to swear but cut it off as he heard one of the men ride back to him. He lay perfectly still as he felt a hand on his back testing the ropes.

"He still out?"

"Cold enough to keep all winter," Bill answered with satisfaction. "Let's go."

The painful jogging was resumed, but Pecos now had an idea to comfort him. Maybe if they believed he were still unconscious, they would grow careless. Escaping from these men would do little good unless he could find a way to clear himself of the murder charge. But unless he did escape, he'd soon be too damn dead to care how many murders were charged to him. Grimly he clung to his one faint hope. Unless they stuck a knife in him before they untied him—.

He wondered about Curly's condition. Had they hurt him? Or already killed him? Pecos dreaded the moment when he would find out. He could not remember his own folks, but he could remember, distinctly, the empty hole of loneliness that had been in him before he met Curly Davis.

Pecos lost track of time and distance. The riders turned presently into a narrow, brushy ravine where they had to slow to a walk. Then again they stopped. Pecos heard the men dismount and apparently enter a building. Probably an old prospector's shack, he thought.

"Get up," the gruff voice ordered.

Curly's voice came back defiantly, "Didja ever try gettin' up with your arms wrapped clear around yourself backwards?"

Pecos drinned happily. Curly was all right then—so far. Tied but unhurt. Maybe they'd get out of this yet. With an effort Pecos quieted his excited breathing, forcing his aching muscles to remain limp.

As the men emerged from the shack, Curly blurted, his voice startled, "Where'd you get him?"

"Out of jail. Nice of us, wasn't it?"

"Is he—dead?"

"Might be, at that," Bill said callously. "I sure bopped him. He hasn't wiggled since."

"Damn you!" Curly whispered hoarsely. "Damn you to hell! What are you goin' to do with him?"

"Same thing we're goin' to do with you," said the man who had killed Gus. "Drag you into an old mine and cut your throat. Bill and I figured on leavin' the country after we cleaned out the old man, but you boys came along just in time to save us the trip."

"Don't feel too bad about it," Bill said with a dry laugh. "You killed a man gettin' him out of jail tonight. Did you know that? Everybody in the country's lookin' for you. We'll just save you both from hangin', that's all."

Pecos heard the creak of saddle leather

as Curly was boosted onto his own horse.

"Tie his feet, Bill," the taller man ordered. "It's too blasted dark to take a chance on him goin' overboard."

"Careful cuss, aren't you?" Curly said sarcastically.

"You betcha. Let's get these slickers off, Bill. Then, if anyone happens along, we just caught these fellers and are bringin' 'em back. They wouldn't live long enough to tell the truth, even if they could prove it."

In a few moments the slow ride was resumed. Pecos' heart was hammering wildly. He thought it unlikely that the mine would be far from the shack, which meant that he'd soon know whether or not he'd get a break. Desperately he wished that he might flex his muscles to see how well they would respond. He felt heavy, numb, and there'd be no time for limbering up. A prayer formed in his heart, but he didn't breathe it.

Objects along the trail were growing more distinct. The moon, evidently, was on the verge of rising. Fervently Pecos hoped that it would not become too bright too quickly. Some things he knew he could do well, but acting wasn't one of them.

Then the horses stopped.

"There's your grave, cowboy," the killer said to Curly. "Take a good look at it from the outside cause it's the last look you'll get."

"You scare the hell out of me," Curly retorted in blunt disgust.

Pecos could not control the thundering of his heart, but he could control his breathing. Slowly, silently he drew air into lungs that just weren't getting enough. With infinite care he wiped all expression from his face, letting the muscles relax.

Gravel crunched as one of the men approached. He grabbed Pecos' hair, twisted his head around to peer closely at him.

"Hell! He's still out. Help me with him, Bill."

Bill laughed without humor. "Too bad he won't know when we lower the boom on him."

The next few moments stretched into an eternity for Pecos Ryan. Bill approached on the other side of the horse, and with hard hands the two men began untying the tight rope. Pecos felt himself slip as the last coil was pulled off. Then the tall killer grasped his shoulders and heaved upward just as Bill laid hold of his belt to pull backward. Pecos shoved up at the same time, and he went off the horse like a catapult. His legs buckled when they hit the ground, but he twisted, wrapping his long arms around Bill and pulling him down.

"Hey—!"

That's as far as Bill got with his startled protest. Pecos' numbed arms were slow moving, but he used the weight of his body, smashing a shoulder into Bill's face. The man tried to roll away, but Pecos flattened him out with a hard knee. He heard his horse lunge away. Then he heard, just in time, a boot land behind him.

Pecos threw himself to the side, pulling the luckless Bill over on top of him. The man screamed as his companion's first bullet tore into his body. Pecos' arms were working better, finally. He got the left one around the throat of his thrashing adversary. With the right he fumbled for the man's gun. A bullet slammed into the ground by his ear. Another thudded into Bill. The man started up so violently that Pecos couldn't hold him. Then he dropped back, a dead weight that flattened Pecos and left him breathless. For a moment he lay still, unable to move.

Before he could collect himself, a panic-stricken horse thundered past, crashing blindly through the brush. The tall killer cursed viciously. He fired one more shot that hit Bill with a sodden thud. Pecos caught a glimpse of the killer as he whirled toward a snorting, fidgeting horse. The moon had risen, but its light was dim. Pecos saw only a tall cowboy who threw

himself onto the horse and spurred back down the canyon, out of sight.

Pecos found Bill's gun, shoved it into his belt. Methodically he went through the dead man's pockets, hoping to find some clue to his identity. Perhaps the identity of this man would lead to the other. In the left shirt pocket he found a blood-smeared letter. The address was legible, however, and for several moments Pecos stared at it.

Then, grinning broadly, he pulled himself to his feet and turned toward the spot where he expected to see Curly. Curly was not there. Only two horses showed in the moonlit clearing, eyeing him with prick-eared interest. One was his roan.

For a moment Pecos' thumping head refused to function. Then, gradually, he connected Curly's disappearance with the sound of the frightened horse tearing through the brush. He understood, too, why the killer had left so suddenly.

With a savage curse Pecos staggered to his horse and climbed into the saddle. In his mind was a clear picture of his pard tied fast to a bronc that was stampeding blindly through rough brushy country. Clear, too, was the picture of what would happen if he met anyone. Pecos was probably the only person in the country right then who would not kill Curly Davis on sight.

There was no telling which way Curly's horse had gone. But Pecos could guess that the man who had helped Bill rob Old Man King would go straight back down the canyon to the shack. Thankful now that the moon had risen, Pecos turned his horse down the dim, rock-stream trail and spurred him to a run. He had gone but a short distance when he heard shots, wild yells. Too many yells from too many voices. Curly had met the posse!

Pecos pulled his horse to a sliding halt. For just a moment he hesitated. Then he turned off the trail and pushed his horse to a stiff trot through the heavy brush. He might be too late to save Curly, but at least he would kill the man who was responsible. He knew now who that man was.

AS PECOS approached the back of the small stone house, he could hear the babble of many excited voices. He dismounted and left his horse ground hitched.

The area before the cabin was cleared and shone brilliantly in the moonlight. A tight group of men stood before the door. In the center of the group stood Curly, his arms tied behind him, his face streaked with the blood of innumerable scratches. A rope had been thrown over a beam protruding from the roof of the cabin, and the end of it was knotted tightly about Curly's neck.

"Kinda sudden, aren't you?" Curly asked bitingly.

"Shut up!" Dave snapped. "I listened to that damn pard of yours, but there won't be any foolin' around this time."

"Somebody must have caught 'em," Shag Wilson said excitedly. "Somethin' happened as they were comin' in and that tall jigger got away."

"That doggone horse would be runnin' yet if Dave hadn't roped him," spoke up a cowboy Pecos had seen at the Bench K.

"Sure a good thing the moon came up," Dave said modestly. "It's been so darned dark I didn't even know who all was with us. What are we waitin' for?"

"Me!" Pecos rang out.

The men jerked around at the sound of his voice, then stood rooted, staring in stunned silence at the gun in his hand.

"Don't move, anybody," Pecos warned coldly. His gray eyes fastened accusingly on Shag Wilson. "You made two bad mistakes, Shag. I wasn't dead like you thought. And neither is Bill. He's layin' up the canyon, with a story he wants to tell the sheriff."

"Tell 'em, Shag," Pecos invited, his

(Continued on page 111)

A pint of water, and only fifteen miles to go. Maybe they could make it after all. . . .

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By HARLAN GRAVES

THE DESERT FIGHTERS

Fifty sun-scorched desert miles lay ahead of them, and between them and the life-giving water Death waited every staggering step of the way.

THE DRY desert air was like the hot breath of a furnace to Jeff Wilson. Even inside the cabin there was no relief from it. It pressed heavily about him, sucking the moisture from his body with greedy, invisible lips.

No man alive, Jeff Wilson knew, not even Bill Powers, would be able to stand the heat of the Devil's Hollow after another two weeks. Jeff couldn't understand how the girl stood it even now.

They should have left the mine ten days ago, when the little trickle of water that had kept them alive through the winter started to dry up. Then, with canteens full, they might have made the fifty miles back

to Adobe Wells afoot. They should not have waited like this for the wagon to come for them. Now, it seemed, fate had ruled against their leaving at all.

Jeff looked at the withered figure of Old Milt Harmon on the bunk, and at Bill Powers and Sue Harmon sitting close by. Sue had been sitting there for hours, watching her father, and she, like the others, knew he was dying. Her face was drawn, grief-marked, but there were no tears in her eyes now. Jeff Wilson wanted to walk over and put his arm around her, to comfort her. But, somehow, that seemed to be Big Bill Powers' privilege. Bill and Sue planned to be married upon their return to town.

The old man moved weakly beneath the blankets, as if to throw them from his heat-tortured body. His face was flushed with fever, and he mumbled incoherently in his delirium.

"Water . . ." he whispered hoarsely. "Gimme another drink—for God's sake. . . . Water."

Bill Powers turned slowly, nodded at Jeff Wilson. Jeff rose silently and went outside. He knelt down at the rock-bound spring and watched the tiny drops as they formed at the tip of a moist rock. He counted those drops as they fell into the earthen jar beneath it. Their meagre supply was coming more and more slowly as the hours passed. In two days, maybe three, only a moist spot would remain.

Two days! and the wagon from Adobe Wells wasn't due for two weeks! It might just as well be two years, for all the good it would do. Jeff Wilson looked out across the countless miles of shimmering waste and wondered if the unseasonal heat wave would cause them to send the wagon sooner. It was a remote hope, so remote it hardly deserved the effort it took to think about it. The stable man at Adobe Wells had his orders, and there was not a chance in a million that anything would cause him to deviate from them.

The sound of the water dripping slowly into the earthen jar drummed into Jeff's mind like hammer strokes. It made him recall he hadn't had a drink since early morning. He lifted the jar, looked into it, careful not to lose a drop of the precious fluid. Six hours of dripping had resulted in less than a pint.

Watching that drip, drip, drip seemed to thicken the furry coat on his tongue. He ached to lift the jar to his lips, to drain it of the liquid his body cried for. Then he remembered Sue and her tears for her stricken father. Those tears reminded him of water, precious drops of sparkling fluid that all the gold in their mine couldn't purchase for them now. Sue and old Milt Harmon would have what little he had collected. Jeff and Big Bill would have to do without.

Slowly, careful lest he spill the least bit, Jeff filled the big tin dipper and put the jar back beneath the rock. Two drops had been wasted, while he had held the jar in his hands. Just two drops, but Jeff Wilson cursed the loss of them.

Gingerly, he carried the dipper into the house, handed it to Bill Powers. Bill stared into the dipper and the blood drained from his face. Fighting back his own feelings desperately, he looked tragically at Jeff.

"Is that all?" he asked tonelessly. "No more than that after six hours?"

Jeff Wilson shook his head grimly. "That's all," he said. "Next time there'll be even less. Then there won't be any at all."

He looked at Sue, and an appealing note came to his voice. "I tell you, Bill, it's crazy for all of us to stay here like this. It won't help old Milt any. One of us could stay, while the other one took Sue and—"

"But I'm not leaving," Sue broke in flatly. "My place is here with Dad. I couldn't leave him now. You know that. I'll stay until . . . until." Her voice faltered, and for the first time, in her eyes, there was sign of her breaking down.

OLD MILT stirred again, looked up and around. The fog seemed to lift slowly from his mind, and his gaze came back from far places. He looked at the dipper in Bill Powers' hand; his tongue ran over fever-parched lips. But he didn't beg now. He smiled pitifully at Sue, as though he wanted to apologize for the thing that kept them all here in Devil's Hollow.

Bill took a cup from the table and poured it half full of water. He seemed to measure it as he poured, like a doctor filling a prescription. He swallowed the hard knot that was in his throat several times, as he watched the water flow into the cup. Jeff Wilson knew that Bill was struggling not to lift that cup to his lips, just as he, himself, had struggled out at the spring. Maybe Bill was thinking of Sue too. He handed the dipper back to Jeff.

"Put this with the rest," he said, too low for Sue's father to hear. "Every drop counts now."

Jeff took the canteen from the cupboard, poured the remaining water into it He shook it before he put it back on the shelf. It was nearly full now. By limiting themselves to the barest necessity, they had saved two quarts of water. But two quarts to take three people across fifty miles of heat-racked desert, was ridiculously insufficient.

Jeff turned and watched Bill Powers as he lifted old man Harmon's head from the pillow. Harmon looked at the cup in Bill's hand longingly, then shook his head.

"It ain't right, Bill," he protested weakly. "I'm done fer, and I know it. I ain't goin' to use the water that—"

"We've got plenty," Bill lied. "The spring is still running strong. We've got all the water we need."

The old man shook his head again, but the sight of water so close to his lips was too much for him. He sucked it greedily from the cup, and Jeff Wilson smiled strangely as he watched him. They had plenty of water, Bill had said. Somehow, Jeff was glad that Bill Powers had lied to the old man at that. It showed him that Bill was willing to go without a drink so that old Milt Harmon could have one. Maybe, when they got out on the desert, Bill would go without water, as Jeff planned to go without water, so that Sue could have it.

The old man sank back on the pillow now. He took a great sighing breath, let it out slowly. Then he turned his head and looked at Bill Powers and Sue a long time. He smiled wanly.

"I'm glad you and Sue are getting married," he told Bill. "It—it takes a big load off my mind. You're big and strong and fine, Bill. I know you'll be happy together. Take care of her, Bill, and don't ever do anything to hurt her. Sue loves you, and it would break her heart if—"

The old man hesitated, seemed to be out of breath. Big Bill Powers reached out and took Sue Harmon by the hand. "I'll take care of her," he promised. "You can count on that."

"That's fine," old Milt sighed. "That's swell."

Then he turned his head away, and a great shudder passed through his body.

* * *

The sun was a big, round eye in the east, slanting, with fiery promise, its rays over the desert. Jeff Wilson and Bill Powers were waiting before the cabin. A little way off, a crude wooden cross marked the grave of old Milt Harmon. Sue stood beside it, motionless, seeming to look at nothing. Then she sank slowly to her knees and started to smooth the raised sand with her hands.

They wanted to cover as many miles as they could before the heat of the sun made walking a torture, but both Jeff and Big Bill waited patiently now. They understood the grief in Sue's heart. Love for her father had kept her here for ten days. Love for Sue had kept Bill Powers here with her.

Nobody knew it, but that was what had kept Jeff Wilson, too.

A little smile touched the corners of Jeff's mouth as he thought of that. He had loved Sue for a long time, secretly. He had worked hard in the mine, and saved his profits, planning to ask her to marry him when he got enough ahead. It had seemed like a slap in the face when he had suddenly realized that it was Bill Powers Sue loved.

Strangely, though, he wasn't jealous of Bill, even now that he knew of it. Bill was the sort of man any woman would look at twice. Jeff had found himself wishing sometimes that he had his strength, his easy, confident carriage. But that wasn't jealousy. If Sue loved Bill, and if Bill made her happy, that was all that counted.

Jeff watched Sue now as she came slowly towards them. Her eyes were rimmed with tears.

She went straight to Bill, put her hand on his arm as they started away from the cabin.

"Maybe it's better this way," Big Bill tried to comfort her. "He never could have made it back, Sue. We may not even make it ourselves."

And as they trudged along, Jeff wondered if Bill Powers wasn't right. Maybe Sue's father was lucky to die back there, in bed, instead of out on the desert. Jeff had seen men come in from the desert, nearer dead than alive. Their lips were cracked and bleeding, their tongues swollen and their faces puffed. Sometimes their fingers were torn to the bone, from trying to dig for water with their hands. It made Jeff shudder to think of what fate might hold in store for Sue.

Jeff felt the canteen slapping at his side. Its coolness reassured him. Maybe they'd get through at that, with Bill Powers to lean on. Even now, there was something in the sight of Bill to inspire confidence. He didn't seem to notice the weight of his pack. He walked easily, lithely even, with Sue clinging to his arm. The strength of three men was in that great body of his—strength enough, perhaps, for all of them.

The sun mounted behind them, became hot on their backs. Jeff could feel the scorching sand through his boot soles. Perspiration coursed from beneath his hat, stung his eyes. He brushed a hand across his forehead, struggled on, the sand pulling like impeding hands at his boots.

Bill strode steadily ahead, seemingly immune to the awful blast of the dead air. But Jeff, increasingly with every moment, could feel the hot breath whistling in and out of his lungs, sucking the moisture from his throat. He wanted to stop, but fought the urge. Pride kept him from admitting the obvious fact that his strength was less than Bill Powers'.

At a great clump of manzanita, Bill finally stopped. He threw the pack from his back, wiped the sweat from his eyes with his neckerchief. His voice was a little husky when he spoke.

"We'll rest here," he told them. "After we cool down a bit, we can have a drink."

Jeff sat down on the sand, exhausted. He could feel the throb of his pulse in his head. It pounded fiercely at first, then gradually slowed. After a while, he could feel it only faintly.

Jeff sat up, took the canteen from his side and handed it to Sue. He watched while she drank sparingly from it. Bill took it next. He lifted it to his lips and tilted his head far back. Jeff felt a sudden panic as he watched the water gurgle into Big Bill's mouth. He wanted to leap forward, to tear the canteen from his lips, but something held him. Finally, Big Bill handed it back to him.

It was Jeff's turn to drink now. He lifted the canteen slowly, let enough water slip past his lips to wet his mouth. He held the canteen to his lips a long time, but no water was running from it. He pressed his tongue over the opening, tried

to swallow as many times as Bill Powers had swallowed. He didn't want to give Sue anything to think about.

After a little while they went on again. The sun was a red-hot ball over their heads, but Jeff didn't notice the heat now. He kept thinking about the way Bill Powers had drunk back there, and it worried him. Then he told himself that maybe Bill hadn't drunk any more than he should Maybe it just seemed like that because Jeff wanted to save every drop he could for Sue. Maybe he was being unreasonable.

But as the afternoon wore on, Jeff knew that it was Bill Powers who was being unreasonable. They stopped and rested more often now. Twice they drank from the canteen, and twice Bill Powers gulped water from it. Jeff Wilson felt a great wave of anger surge through him each time, but he bit his lip to keep from saying anything. He couldn't say anything in front of Sue. She loved Bill, and old Milt Harmon had said it would break her heart if anything happened to destroy that love.

Jeff hoped that Sue hadn't noticed Bill was drinking more than his share of the water. As for himself, he knew he wouldn't do anything to call her attention to it. Before he'd do that, he thought heatedly, he'd let Bill drink all the water. But the knowledge that if he let that happen, they wouldn't make it to Adobe Wells, pressed down heavily upon him. He'd have to stop Bill somehow, without letting Sue know.

After what seemed an eternity of hellish heat and gnawing thirst, they stopped again. The sun sank slowly behind the fringe of haze-mantled hills far in the distance, and the air lost some of its stifling heat. They rested first, then ate from the supplies in the pack. Night came swiftly. Exhausted sleep settled over them.

IT SEEMED only an instant before Jeff Wilson opened his eyes again. Gray dawn-light was crowding the shadows to the west. Jeff lay there a long time, looking into the heavens, wondering if he had dreamed the things that were in his mind! The awful, torturing heat . . . the intense craving for water. . . . Bill drinking greedily from the canteen. Then he knew that he hadn't dreamed them. Bill and Sue were lying close to him.

Jeff felt for the canteen at his side, lifted it to his ear and shook it. A little chill raced up his back as he realized that it was less than half full now. He had drunk little of it; Sue hardly more than himself.

A feeling of resentment swept over Jeff, and he cursed under his breath. He couldn't understand Bill Powers at all—Bill, the strong, the lordly. Bill professed to love Sue, and had promised to take care of her, yet he seemed to think only of himself when he had the canteen to his lips. Jeff shook his head sadly. He guessed that some men changed a hell of a lot when their own hides were in danger. . . .

Jeff woke the others, and they started on again. This day was even worse than the last. The sun was hotter on their backs, the sand more sticky on their boots. Jeff noticed that after a few hours Bill was walking alone, ahead of Sue.

The water in the canteen splashed tantalizingly at Jeff's side. He knew that before long Bill would want to drink. He would stop and hold his hand out for the canteen, and Jeff would have to give it to him. He'd have to give it to him, or have a showdown. Jeff didn't want that to happen.

Gradually, Jeff dropped back until he was far behind Bill.

He reasoned that if he stayed behind, Bill wouldn't be able to ask for water. He stopped when Bill stopped, went on when he started forward again. Then he saw Bill pause, turn and look back at him uncertainly.

Jeff waited, but Bill didn't go on again. Bill started back toward him, wobbling a little as he walked. As he came closer,

Jeff could see the anger on his face, the wild look in his eyes.

"What's the idea?" Bill demanded. "Can't you keep up with us? I've wanted a drink for an hour, and couldn't get it. Give me the canteen."

Jeff looked up ahead and saw Sue lying on the sand. She wasn't watching. She wouldn't hear what was said.

"You can't have a drink," Jeff told Big Bill abruptly. "Not now."

Bill Powers stared at him. "I can't have a drink? Who the hell says I can't have a drink! Have you gone crazy?"

"You're the one that's crazy," Jeff said slowly. "There's less than a quart of water left, and we're not half way along yet. I'm dishin' out the water from now on. I'm gonna make it last. I—I—"

"*You're* dishin' out the water, huh!" Bill interrupted angrily. "Maybe you think you're gonna save it for yourself. Well, if that's the case, you've got another think coming. I'll—"

Bill started forward threateningly, but stopped when he saw the gun in Jeff Wilson's hand. His face twitched with rage as he stood there, his great body swaying. Jeff moved quickly forward, lifted Bill's gun from its holster. He dropped it at his feet, kicked sand over it.

"Listen to me, Bill," Jeff said between clenched teeth, "and get it straight. You're gettin' a drink when we stop tonight, and not before. If you ask for water in front of Sue, I'll kill you! I don't want to kill you, Bill. Don't make me." He hesitated, slipped his gun back in his holster. "I don't want Sue to know how a gent can turn into a skunk when he gets thirsty, or that the man she plans to marry ain't worth one of the hairs on her head. Remember that, Bill! Now turn around and get going!"

Bill Powers stood there, glaring at Jeff. He spat out a curse, then turned and started away. He walked past Sue without stopping to help her up. Jeff saw her crawl tiredly to her feet and follow behind Bill. He wondered if she had noticed anything wrong.

An hour passed, and Jeff saw Sue stumble and fall. He hurried forward, pulled her to her feet. They went on, trying to match the grim pace Bill set ahead of them. It was harder for Jeff now, with Sue clinging to him.

Jeff wanted to stop, but Bill kept steadily on. Jeff wondered if Bill had gone loco, or if he was deliberately trying to outdistance them. He didn't stop to rest at all now. He would stagger and fall, claw himself erect and stumble on again, making a crazy, erratic track in the sand.

Jeff looked at the sun and realized dazedly that the afternoon was nearly gone. In some way, he didn't know how, they had lived through another day. They must be within fifteen miles of Adobe Wells now. But fifteen miles seemed like a million. . . .

Ahead of them, Big Bill plunged forward, suddenly, on his face and didn't get up again. He lay there in the sand, his great chest heaving, till Jeff and Sue came up to him. He tried to talk, but only a croaking noise came from his throat. His tongue was swollen, his lips puffed and raw. Jeff knew that his own lips were swollen that Sue's lips were cracked and bleeding.

He unscrewed the top from the canteen and handed it to Sue. She held it to Big Bill's lips, letting some of the water run into his mouth. Then she drank a little herself and handed it back to Jeff. Jeff wet his parched mouth, noticed that there was about a pint left. A pint of water, and only fifteen miles to go—maybe they could make it after all. . . .

They were hungry, but they didn't take food from the pack. Jeff knew they wouldn't be able to eat it now. He sank back weakly on the sand and watched the sun disappear from view. The sound of heavy breathing told him that Big Bill and Sue had surrendered to exhaustion. Then consciousness flowed from him.

When Jeff opened his eyes again the sun was shining full in his face. He blinked at it dazedly, closed his eyes for a brief moment. Every muscle in his body ached, but in spite of that he felt better. The swelling of his lips was not as bad, and his tongue didn't choke him when he tried to swallow.

He sat up, stiff and sore, weak and dizzy. He looked over to the place where Big Bill and Sue had lain, and his heart almost stopped in his breast. Sue was there, but Big Bill Powers was gone.

Wild thoughts flashed through Jeff's brain. He felt of the holster at his side. His gun was gone! He looked for the canteen. It was gone too. Big Bill was gone, and had taken them with him!

Jeff scrambled to his feet, telling himself that he was not awake—that this was a nightmare he was having. No man could be so low as to leave them here to die! No man could do this to the woman he had planned to marry, not even to save his own life! But it wasn't a dream. The ache of his body the pounding of his heart, was too real.

Jeff saw tracks in the sand leading off to the west. Wildly, stumbling in his hurry, he followed them. He knew it was useless, but something seemed to drive him on. Maybe Bill had just started! Perhaps he could still catch him!

Then Jeff saw the canteen lying in the sand ahead of him. He raced forward, knew before he picked it up that it would be empty. He clutched it in his hands, stared dazedly at it, and then a stream of bitter curses flowed from his lips.

Jeff remembered the words of old Milt Harmon: "She loves you, Bill. Don't ever do anything to hurt her. It would break her heart." Jeff could picture the look that would be on Sue's face when she learned that Big Bill had gone, leaving them without water.

Slowly, his face an expressionless mask Jeff started back to the place where he had left Sue. She was sitting up, watching him as he came toward her. Jeff was glad he had found the canteen again. She wouldn't know Bill had emptied it.

"Where have you been?" she asked him. "Where—where's Bill?"

Jeff looked at her a long time without saying anything. "We didn't want to wake you up," he finally said. "Bill thought it would be better if he went on alone. He—he said he could make it to town and bring back help. He told me to tell you not to worry." Jeff smiled strangely, then went on again: "He'll make it, Sue. He's strong enough to lick even the desert."

Jeff thought he saw a look of pride in Sue's eyes. Big Bill was strong all right—but he did not have the sort of strength it took to make a man. The desert had licked him.

"We'll go on," Jeff told her. "We'll go as far as we can before Bill brings help. It shouldn't be long now."

They started out, the sun already high in the heavens. Sue walked lightly at his side. Jeff wondered if it was pride for Big Bill that made her walk that way—pride for the man she thought was facing the desert alone to bring them help. . . .

AN HOUR passed, and Sue began to grow weary. Jeff began to weaken. He found it harder and harder to place one foot in front of the other, and he knew that his throat was dry and caked again. He wondered what he would do if Sue suggested that they drink from the canteen. Then he remembered that she hadn't asked for water all of yesterday. He hoped she wouldn't ask for it today.

The rising heat waves made the desert ahead of them dance crazily before their eyes, and doubts began to assail Jeff. He could feel the strength leaving his body, but he kept on. He'd have to keep on.

She stumbled and fell. It was all Jeff could do to pull her to her feet again. He

(Continued on page 112)

BEANS AND

YANCEY CLAY said, "This here is a one-saloon town. Feller can't hardly raise much Ned in a one-barroom burg like this." Yancey Clay rode a large black horse. He was well over six feet in height and had a round, bland, innocent countenance. He looked like an out-sized cowboy.

Hiram Goodloe said, "Nobody asked you hereabouts to tear up the town. Fall down off that nag, and see if you can look intelligent, while I inquire about things." Hiram was five foot six in his high-heeled boots, and he wore them so high he sometimes appeared to be walking on stilts. His face was tight and wizened, and his brown eyes

BULLETS FREE!——

By WILLIAM R. COX

Riders thundered from the woods. . . .

darted, never still. His speech had a tang foreign to Texas, yet he was bow-legged and weather-beaten and he looked like a cowboy.

The town was called Basket and was in the Basket Valley, surrounded by the Willow Range with the Willow River providing irrigation and giving power for the sawmill. There were two big ranches and one

Range War Saga

The Ratchet spread was a run-down wreck, the ranch buildings falling apart, the remnants of a once-great herd almost invisible. . . . Yet, seven tough, courageous men were willing to die for a chance to own it!

sawmill and the town and this one saloon.

Yancey glanced at the sign over the saloon which said, "The Pig-Sty." Yancey shook his head. He let Hiram go first through the swinging doors. It was almost impossible for him not to let Hiram go first every place. The little man could scuttle around on those high heels like a rabbit.

There were two men in the saloon, one in front of the bar, one behind. The one who was on the drinking side was hooked to the mahogany by his elbows, which alone kept him on balance. He had a lean face, worn, not young. His hat was jammed on the side of his head with shocking effect, making him appear clownish, despite the obvious essential dignity of his features.

The man behind the bar was slim, dapper. He came toward the two strangers to Basket and said, "Howdy, gents. I'm Pig Slavin."

"You don't look like no pig t' me," said Hiram. "This is the slickest, cleanest bar I've seen in Texas."

Slavin smiled. "Happens, gents, I own a little pig farm."

"Stinkin' pig-man," said the man at the bar. "Gimme 'nother damn drink or I'll rip up the joint, Pig-man."

Slavin had a square face and a hard jaw. He said, "Something for you two gents?"

"Just whiskey," said Hiram. "We was lookin' for a man."

The square bottle slid before them, the glasses were miraculously clean and polished. The barroom was large and airy and bright, with mirrors and shining glassware. Slavin said, "Basket ain't too big to find a man in."

Hiram and Yancey drained their glasses. Yancey poured another, but Hiram played with his empty shot glass. Hiram said, "Man name o' Peale—Red Peale—said there was a job for us."

Slavin's face altered subtly as he regarded the two dusty riders. He said, "Oh. Yeah? Well, now . . ." His eyes slid away toward the drunken man. "He'll be here any minute now. You'll have to wait around for him."

"We can wait," Hiram assured him. "Maybe you better see to your customer there. Poor fella. He looks bad."

Yancey Clay was on his third drink. His mild blue eyes stayed with the drunk. He could see that the sombrero had been a fine Stetson before it had been soiled and mishandled; the boots were hand-made of finest leather. The linen of the man was well-stitched and soft—but filthy. He must be on a binge, Yancey thought, sternly repressing a slight tinge of envy.

Slavin said, "He is bad . . . ." Then he caught himself, squared his jaw and moved down toward the end of the bar.

The drunk said, "All right, Pig-man. Think I won't do it, huh?" He drew himself up and for a moment it seemed he acquired almost perfect sobriety. His legs spread, he stood straight. Slavin stared, then made a motion to come out from behind the bar.

The drunk produced a gun from under his coat. It was a Peacemaker, a long-barrelled one. It looked very ugly and as big as a cannon, in the hands of a man plainly irresponsible. Slavin changed his mind and ducked around the edge of a partition at the end of the bar. The drunk whooped, "All right, Pig-man. I'll take the glasses, first."

The revolver went up, then down with a flourish, aimed toward the glistening array of glassware.

Then the revolver did not move, did not go off, did not do anything but remain, as though suspended in mid-air. Yancey Clay had taken one step and reached out one of his hands. The fingers were longer than most men's, the hand was slender and not ham-like, but it curved like a steel talon, gripping the man's hand so that he could actually not get up enough strength to press the trigger.

Yancey made a quick move, and the gun came away. He said in his mild voice, "Them hair triggers is plumb funny, huh?

Sometimes they go off too quick, other times no shoot."

The man whirled. It was too much for his drunkenness, and he sagged against the bar. His lips curled back. He began cursing. Yancey stood dangling the gun in his powerful hand, smiling.

Hiram Goodloe poured a slim second drink and listened with his head cocked to one side. The man repeated himself. Hiram shrugged and said, "Shucks. Thought he might be a good one. Any mule skinner can beat him."

THE man kept on cursing. Yancey flipped the gun open and took out the shells. He twirled the barrel, blew at a bit of dust on the finish, handed the weapon, butt foremost, to the drunk.

The drunk snatched at it and launched himself forward, trying to bat out Yancey's brains with the swinging muzzle. Yancey flung up his right arm. He caught the underpart of the drunk's forearm.

The drunk spun and staggered half the length of the bar. He hung there a moment, red-eyed, frustrated, hating the world, probably hating himself.

Yancey said, "Hate to butt in, Mister, but that there back bar is the purtiest I seen in some time. Like t' leave it thataway."

The drunk lost his hold and slid into the sawdust. He was wearing black broadcloth trousers of good cut and a light linen coat. His hat rolled in the dirt, and Yancey picked it up and brushed it. Slavin was again behind the bar.

Yancey said, "It sure is a durn shame the way some nice folks let themselves go, huh?"

Slavin's square face was serious. "I'll give you boys a break. You say Peale sent for you? Then you'd better light a shuck outa here before George Acton wakes up and finds out who roughed him."

Yancey blinked, and Hiram said, "Acton? Why, he owns the Ratchet Ranch. He's Peale's boss!"

"He's over yonder in the sawdust and the spittoons," said Slavin.

Yancey put the hat carefully down upon the bar. He said, "Damn. We done rode a far piece, too."

"Still is a plumb purty barroom," said Hiram. "Should never call it the Pig-Sty. . . . How come you keep pigs, Slavin?"

"I'm Irish," said Slavin. "And somebody had to keep pigs."

Yancey drank a quick whiskey and waited for Hiram to pay. Hiram always kept what money they had. Yancey never was much good with money. Hiram had been raised in Maine. The little man dropped a gold coin on the bar. Yancey was pretty sure that there weren't many more of them.

Hiram said to the barkeeper, "We ain't fussy, y'understand. We only got one or two rules. But workin' for a likker head is agin nature."

Slavin said quickly, "George ain't so bad. Leastways he wasn't, till he had hard luck."

"The hard luck is in his belly," commented Hiram. "Nice seein' you, Mr. Slavin."

He padded out of the bar. Yancey looked at the huddled, snoring figure of the man they had come many miles to work for and sighed. There was pity in his blue eyes, but he followed his partner onto the main street of Basket. He was aware that Slavin had come around the end of the bar and was bending over the prone man. Something stirred down in his big heart, then he walked on.

Hiram said, "We got to eat and sleep a night. We oughta stable them nags. They need it. Damn that drunkard."

Yancey said, "You never take enough to git drunk."

"Damn right!" snapped the little man. "We got a hard enough time tryin' to make a stake for that prospectin' trip. If it wasn't for you tankin' up regular . . ."

"Hell," said Yancey. "Nobody never saw me drunk."

"You got hollow legs," sighed Hiram. He could never reprimand the big fellow harshly. There was something about Yancey which disarmed him and always had since their first meeting. His ancestry and training called for hard work, for forging ahead, for self-denial in order to rise to the top. But he would never get there, he thought hopelessly, while he stuck to Yancey Clay.

They were as unlike as two men could be. Hiram's avarice and ambition were a constant amazement and amusement to Yancey. The big fellow ate and drank and slept and played and sometimes he would work. When he worked, he did more than any six, he claimed, which excused him from more than two months labor in the year. Where Hiram thought about getting along in the world, Hiram thought mostly about other people and how they had such a tough time getting along. When Hiram did get his hands on a stake, Yancey would throw it away.

Night was about to fall on the Basket Valley. The high western crown of Willow Ridge seemed to reach up for the red ball of the sun. There was a small restaurant, and Hiram paused at the door, weighing the two coins in his jeans pocket. Yancey glanced back at the Pig-Sty.

There was the muffled sound of a revolver shot. Yancey moved, apparently without speed, but covering ground like a greyhound. Hiram moved in the opposite direction, sidling like a small spider. Each had a Colt in his right hand.

Slavin emerged from the saloon. Several men ran out of the four-room hotel, which boasted a pool table. A few more dashed out of the general store, just closing. Slavin, on the board walk before his bar, yelled, "George was just shot! The back way!"

Slavin plunged back into the saloon. Yancey had taken off at his first word. He knew no one had come out the front of the Pig-Sty.

The entire population of Basket was milling in the dust of Main Stret within five minutes. Yancey ran all the way down to the back of the saloon. He dropped to one knee and eagerly began examining tracks around the back door.

The ground was hard and the heel-marks indistinct. The alley was boarded. He strode through the alley and met Hiram at the corner of the building.

Hiram said, "No horse got away."

"Nope," said Yancey.

The crowd was surging into the Pig-Sty. Hiram said, "Then either Slavin done it, or the man was smart."

Yancey said, "Yep."

Hiram said, "Either way, we ain't got no boss, even if we wanted him."

Yancey said, "Uh-huh." He was watching a small girl fight her way through the outer reaches of the crowd. She had brown hair and brown eyes, and her mouth was twisted, and tears were on her cheeks. People recognized her and stepped aside, suddenly silent. A tall man with red hair appeared and swept his way to her. Together they went into the barroom.

A man said, "Too bad. Grace had a hard 'nuff time afore. Now Nate Pribble will git Ratchet easy as fallin' off a log."

Yancey touched the man's shoulder. "That's Acton's daughter?"

"Yep," said the man. "Purty, ain't she?"

"Beautiful," drawled Yancey. "Cutest lil thing I seen since the ole hound bitch threw them speckled pups."

Hiram said, "Come on, Yancey. We're strangers; we have no interest in Acton. Let's pull stakes. We can eat later."

"Aw, no," said Yancey. "No use to leave now. Poor Acton, he's dead. We wouldn' be workin' for no drunk now."

"Worse," snapped Hiram. "We'd be workin' for a woman!"

"Woman? Shucks, that ain't but a sweet lil ole gal," said Yancey.

"You heard me. We got to go. That gold'll rot up in the Coronado. . . ." Hiram sighed. It was no use. He looked toward

the buckskin he had been forking for so many days. He could mount and go. He could win enough in a gambling house . . . . or he could steal enough . . . . or he could even earn enough to make a stake.

He shook his head. Yancey was already shouldering the crowd, going into the saloon. He followed . . . .

THE law in Basket was Gillick. He had a generally washed-out appearance enhanced by a blond, drooping, discouraged mustache. He said, "I know, Red. Pribble and his bunch are after Ratchet. But that ain't town business. I got to investigate this."

Red Peale was almost as big as Yancey, with spreading shoulders and long arms, rather handsome in a hard way. He said, "Clay told you what's what. The killer walked in the back way, shot George, walked out, went around the Pig-Sty and joined the crowd."

Gillick said, "You don't 'spect me to pick him right out, do you?"

"Pribble and his whole gang was in town," said Red Peale. "That dirty killer, Ollie Morrow, Lop-Ear, Battle, Allen. They wasn't in the hotel; they wasn't in the store nor the smithy. They claim they was in the stable, but nobody seen them in the stable."

Gillick said, "What you want me to do, Red? Pribble's bellerin' that I should arrest Slavin and these two drifters."

"They are *not* drifters!" Peale snapped. "They're my men. I sent for them."

Gillick said, "Red, you don't need two men. Ratchet's only got a herd of runts left. George done drunk up Ratchet. Spent a fortune sendin' Grace t' school, then took t' red-eye. I dunno why you hung around so long. Now Ratchet is finished. Grace'll have t' sell to Nate—and why not? It ain't like there was anything but the land to sell."

Red Peale's face was white. When Gillick finished, he said, "You said your piece, Marshal. Now lemme say mine. You find George Acton's murderer and keep off Ratchet. You do them two things or I'll see you—and I mean I'll see you personal."

Gillick stroked his sad mustache. He sighed, "I'm always available, Red. Seems like there's no way for me to 'scape." He looked out of the window, and his faded eyes were expressionless. Red Peale stormed out of the office across the street from the Pig-Sty.

Yancey Clay and Hiram followed the foreman of Ratchet into the bar. They had listened to every word of the discussion. They huddled into a group at the end of the bar, and no one came near enough to overhear them. Hiram said, "Red, you offered us a hundred a month apiece. Ain't but one answer to that. You were hirin' gun-hands."

Peale said, "You were recommended."

"Could be," nodded Hiram. "But there ain't much for us to gun-guard, is there? If Ratchet's so run-down, reckon you wanted us for some other good reason than herdin' a few runty steers."

Peale said, "Plainly speakin', I didn't want you. George made me send that letter. But now that you're here and George got murdered, I'd appreciate it if you stuck around."

Hiram said, "For what?"

"A hundred a month," said Peale grimly. "Outa my pocket, if necessary."

Yancey Clay sipped a drink. He said, before Hiram could speak, "Okay."

Hiram scowled. Five men came surging through the swinging doors, and Hiram turned to survey them with suspicious eyes. He recognized Nate Pribble at once, from descriptions he had heard.

Pribble was also a New England man, they said. He was taller than Yancey Clay, but he was no wider than the edge of a barn door. His shoulders bent him into the shape of a question mark. He was clean shaven and bald as an eagle, and his skin was a dull ashen shade. Yet he was no more than thirty-eight, they said, and a

hard rider, a dirty, tough fighter besides.

Ollie Morrow was different. He was blocky, short-legged, and without a neck. He was red-faced and slant-eyed, all killer. Hiram and Yancey had seen him before, years ago, down El Paso way. He had his men: Lop Ear, a reprobate; Battle, a former pugilist of no note; Allen, a slim youth with shallow eyes. They were a formidable mob.

Hiram murmured, "So you want us to fight that outfit, for a hundred per month? You don't figger us to live to earn any pay, huh?"

"If you're yellow, clear out," said Red Peale sourly. "I got to see somebody. If you want to work, be at Ratchet tomorrow." He swung around and walked out, curling his lip at the Pribble gang from the Big N Ranch.

Yancey had not moved. Morrow had spotted him, of course, and was yapping in Pribble's ear. Pribble stared at the two newcomers to Basket. Slavin slid glasses and whiskey bottles around.

Pribble said, "You two. What's your play?" His voice was like a creaking hinge. His men lined up on the other side of him. At least, Hiram thought, Pribble fronted them, without fear, his coal black eyes probing.

Hiram stepped away from the bar, staring up at the tall rancher. Arms akimbo, he said, "I don't cotton to that kind of talk."

Pribble's eyes widened. "You're no Texan. You're from Maine."

Hiram said, "Wouldn't let that stop you, would you?" His arms bowed a little from his side. The gun hung convenient to his right hand. His left posed delicately, fingers spread. His flinty little face scowled at Pribble.

Hiram was so small that he caught people's attention and held it. He was like David challenging Goliath. The impertinence of him shocked the hard gang to immobility.

Meantime, and far more to the point, no one was watching the good-natured, big, soft-looking Yancey. His sixgun was levelled on the bar; his wide face was grinning. He said, "Hey, Hiram, Don't kill all them jaspers!"

Pribble whirled. Morrow cursed, his eyes fastened on Yancey's gun. Behind the bar, Slavin quietly retired around his convenient corner.

Hiram said, "Me and Yancey is working for Ratchet. I'm servin' notice that we don't want people botherin' us—nor talkin' mean. We know Morrow and his bunch. He knows us. Ask him."

He held them for a moment with his glare. Then he turned and stalked out of the Pig-Sty, back erect, trying to appear tall. Behind him sauntered Yancey, his gun holstered, his gait shambling. The big man paused at the door, and one blue eye disappeared in a Gargantuan wink. He whispered, "Don't be scared of us, you hombres. We are just playin'!" He went out after his diminutive partner.

Hiram said, "I'm goin' to bed. I got to think. You just run plumb into things, then I got to think us out. Now we can't quit. I made my brag, and we got to see it through. You're sure goin' to get us killed."

Yancey said, "You go ahead and think, Hiram. Ain't got a brain, m'self. I reckon I'll take a lil walk, or somethin'. You go upstairs and ponder."

HE WATCHED the pool players for awhile, allowing Hiram time to get into one of the four rooms above. Then he moved back outdoors. He had seen the rocker on the porch, turned away from the steps, but moving in slow rhythm back and forth. He was deliberately noisy, making his way to it.

The girl's face shone in moonlight. There were no tears, just infinite sadness and hopelessness. She said, "Yes, Mr. Clay?"

"I was . . . er . . . lookin' for Red."

"He just left," she said. "I am glad you are working for me, but I fail to see what you and your little partner can do."

"Miss Acton," Yancey said earnestly, "don't never let Hiram hear you call him 'little'. It really hurts that boy."

She almost smiled. "He is a rooster," she said.

Yancey almost said, "Uh-huh, killed twenty men," but caught himself in time. Instead he said, "Yes'm. He is now thinkin' us outa trouble."

"No one could possibly think me out of trouble," she said. "Tomorrow I must make up my mind whether to sell my home, my only home, or to wait for Nate Pribble to take it."

Yancey lowered his voice almost to a whisper and said, "Miss Acton, was your pappy much of a gunman?"

"He couldn't handle a revolver," she said. "Oh, he could shoot a snake. Or a man, I suppose, at close range. But he was a rifle shot, not a pistoleer. He never carried a revolver . . . until . . . until . . ."

"Miss Acton," persisted Yancey, "why did your pappy take to red-eye?"

She gasped, and the silence grew thick.

Yancey said, "Miss, I done drunk more red-eye than your pappy ever seen. Why, I got a reputation for drinking hooch. But your pappy didn't seem t' me to be the sort who would. That's why I ast you."

She said, "I . . . I was away. I . . . I don't know. I hate to speak of it."

Yancey said, "Miss, if I knew why your pappy started drinkin' and why he was totin' that hawk-leg the day he was kilt, we'd be a lot better off."

"Better off towards what?" she demanded. She was leaning forward in the chair, staring at him. From her eyes gleamed a faint hope, as moonlight reflected in a pool.

"You got nerve, I see," said Yancey. "Why, Miss, to'ards findin' out why they ain't room for two ranches in Basket Valley, why Pribble wants Ratchet in such a big rush when he could wait for your pappy to drink it up, why there has got to be a gang under Ollie Morrow to handle only you and Red Peale and your late lamented pappy . . . Oh, lots of things. I ain't smart, Miss Acton. Hiram's smart. But I can figger."

She said, "Red has always done the figuring for me, since Father, since he . . ."

"Sure," said Yancey contentedly. "That's what I thought."

There was a general exodus from the Pig-Sty. The Big N horses were all tied to the rack, Yancey had observed, the way he noticed everything. He sat in the shadows with the girl and watched Ollie Morrow mount. The men were not the sky-shooting, hip-hoorahing kind of cowboys. They got onto their horses like they meant business. They were a hard bunch, all right. . . .

There was a sharp yipe, then a low growl. Nate Pribble swore savagely. A dog arose from where Pribble had stepped on it in the shadows at the hitching rack. It was a big dog, but gaunt and famished.

Pribble said, "Damn it, there's hounds all over Basket. Git, you." He kicked the hollow ribs of the dog.

Yancey made a terrible noise in his throat. He vaulted the railing in one motion. His giant form made a perfect target, flashing across the street. Yet he slammed ponies aside, bursting through. The dog was still growling, refusing to back up. It had a wolf head, but one ear was broken. It was a dog who had seen bitter days.

Pribble said passionately, "All right, take it, then, you mangy . . . ."

Yancey reached him. Yancey's hand seized Pribble's wrist. The lean man went off the ground as the other hand of the giant caught his belt. He shot through the air and landed among the men and horses of Big N with a clatter. Yancey's voice said, "Nobody's shootin' no dog when I'm around!"

Pribble's creaking voice arose to a scream,

"Get him! Gun the big son . . . Kill him!"

Across the street Hiram's whip-like, sharp accents came crisply, "Don't move, Ollie. None of you. Red, you got them covered?"

From somewhere Red Peale said, "You bet. This is it, Nate. You throw one shot, and I'm turnin' my wolf loose."

Pribble arose from the conglomeration of horses, harness and men like a beanpole against the moon's light. He threw a leg over a tall roan. He said, controlling his voice with effort, "No use everybody gettin' killed over a dog. You got the advantage over us right now. We'll be seein' you boys later. And don't never forget that!"

Big N rode out of Basket in a bunch, sparks flying from the heels of their horses. Red Peale came from the alley alongside the Pig-Sty and said, "Man, that was dumb. How'd you know I'd be along? How'd you know your pardner wasn't asleep?"

Yancey looked at the foreman of Ratchet with sleepy blue eyes. "Huh? Oh, I'm jest sorta dumb. Can't stand to see animals abused. Nor people that can't fight back. I just ain't got good sense, Red."

"Damn it anyway," said Peale. "Miss Acton might have been hurt...."

"I sure am plumb sorry," said Yancey humbly. "You carry my apologies, huh, Red? I gotta feed this here dog."

"That dog's got the mange. You'd do him a favor if you shot him now."

"That ain't mange," said Yancey. "That's from runnin' in the brush. And fightin'. See the claw marks? Coyotes. He's part wolf, and the coyotes hate him like some folks hate a breed...."

"You're soft, Yancey," said Peale, in a low voice. "You better watch your step. Soft men don't go far hereabouts. I need hard men."

"Well, you got Hiram," Yancey said. He grinned amiably and motioned to the dog. The long, lean animal followed him into the Pig-Sty. Peale shook his head and went across the street to where Grace Acton sat with her hands clenched, staring at the big man and the skinny dog as they entered the barroom.

Slavin had some scraps of food. The two men squatted, as men will, examining the dog. It was not much of a dog, just an indeterminate gray in color, long of leg and deep of chest. It needed food and rest.

Yancey moved to the bar for a nightcap. The dog twitched its hide, and its head came up. It began sidling closer to Yancey, dragging the food pan with its mouth.

Slavin nodded. "Got yourself a hound."

"Ain't it hell?" Yancey drank his whisky slowly, watching the barkeeper. "If George Acton had him, he'd be alive today —or his killer'd be hangin' from that handy tree down the road."

Slavin's eyes did not flicker. "Uh-huh. See what you mean, all right. I was bendin' over, reachin' for a fresh bottle when it happened. You reckon you 'bout finished the whiskey?"

Yancey said, "Didn't mean nothin', Slavin."

"You're workin' for Ratchet," Slavin shrugged.

"Okay. Keep my dog tonight?"

"Sure. What you goin' to call him?" asked Slavin.

"George," said Yancey. "Think I'll jest call him George."

"Oh," said Slavin, "George. Well, good night. We'll be plantin' George Acton tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWO

The Cabin and the Corpse

THE ranch house was perched at the edge of the slope leading up to Willow Ridge, a natural setting of great beauty, which was wasted by Hiram Goodloe. The buckskin and the black climbed the hill with plodding patience, and George, the gray dog, ran ahead.

Yancey said, "That dog don't have no

fun, but he's a natural pathfinder. Looks like there ain't no way down from Willow Ridge except across the shale. The ranch'd be a good fort, come a fight."

Hiram grunted, "Why should there be a fight?"

They came off the shale to rocky footing, then to an outcropping ledge. It was a wide ledge of rock, and they paused, sliding from their saddles. From here they could look down on all of Basket Valley.

Hiram said, "It does look like a basket. The Willow Ridge forms the rim. If it wasn't for the river over yonder, cutting in, this would be a dead spot. Wonder why George Acton come here? Wonder why Pribble come later and begun buckin' him? Wonder why a real cowman like Red Peale stays here?"

"Peale stays 'count of the gal," said Yancey. He was sitting on a square slab of stone. "That dog don't play. He don't have no fun at all."

"Dang the hound," said Hiram. He squatted on his high-heeled boots, brooding over Basket. The Ratchet lay north, its boundary to the south showing plainly along a growth of pine woods. Big N was almost identical in size, its boundary the hills toward Mexico. Willow ran all around, a serrated line of rock covered sparsely with trees. The town was deep in the middle. It would be hot in summer, Hiram thought.

Yancey was throwing stones and ordering the dog to fetch them. George stood braced, cocking his good ear, looking from his big master to the stones. He did not budge. His expression was eager, but reserved. Yancey said, "Don't know nothin'?" He got up and walked to one of the stones he had thrown. He said, "Come here, dumb dog."

George came slithering, anxious to please. Yancey put the stone in the gaping mouth. George was filling out in the days since George Acton had been buried. He weighed ninety pounds, Yancey reckoned. George chewed the stone without relish.

George fell in behind as Yancey went back to the rock. He dropped the stone halfway. Yancey patiently went back, got it and put it in George's mouth. They paraded solemnly to Yancey's seat. He threw the stone again. George seemed to shake his head in confusion.

"Some dogs just naturally ain't fun-dogs," Yancey surmised. He threw the stone again. George looked at him without moving. He got up and lumbered lazily to the spot where it lay and motioned to George. This time George patiently picked it up and carried it back. But he would not run and fetch. He evidently saw no fun in it.

"In order to learn a dog, you got to have more sense than the animal," Hiram observed. "Why don't you start thinkin' about who killed George Acton and why? I'd light a shuck outa here if I didn't think there was somethin' profitable here, on Ratchet, that Pribble wants awful bad. It ain't that puny herd of Acton's, I know."

"Maybe it's the nice house. Pribble's shack is mean," said Yancey. "Grace done fixed her house purty."

Hiram said, "If Pribble's on the prod, why ain't he gunned Peale?"

Yancey threw another stone, walked the dog to where it fell. "Peale ain't so easy to gun. He walks soft in the night."

Hiram snorted. "Ollie Morrow and his bunch could nail Peale right from here with a rifle. You reckon Gillick'd ever try to do anythin' about it? Gillick's clingin' to town. He ain't panicked, but he ain't brave."

Yancey said, "This here dog just don't wanta have fun."

"Whiskey, women, now dogs," said Hiram disgustedly. "Ain't a thin dime of profit in none of 'em. We got to do somethin', find out what Pribble wants, save it for Miss Acton, git a reward or somethin' and try that Coronado country. That gold is just layin' around, the Injun said."

Yancey said, "Gold. People's funny about gold. They'd do anything for it. Now me,

I crave to spend it, but gettin' it ain't sometimes hardly worth the trouble . . . . Is that Peale down yonder in the west pasture among the Ratchet herd?"

Hiram got a pair of field glasses from his saddle bag. He adjusted them and said, "It sure is. He's just ridin' among them, starin' at them, shakin' his red head. And yonder's Miss Acton, comin' into the pasture. She's ridin' a gray pony."

Yancey's blue eyes were contemplative. "And ain't that Pribble, standin' among the trees on the Big N line?"

Hiram angled the glasses and said, "It sure is! And Morrow and the others."

Yancey said, "You cover 'em, Hiram. I'm plumb curious about a heel mark I seen behind Slavin's Pig-Sty the night Acton was shot." He was on the black horse before Hiram could reply. He rode down onto the shale, oblivious of his partner's angry objection. The gray dog ran ahead.

The big black was no show horse, but he had the qualities Yancey needed in a mount. He could run under Yancey's weight and he could last all day at a good pace. The Big N crowd was scattered among the trees, but none held a gun. They just semed to be watching while Red Peale consulted with the girl.

Yancey swung wide, then came down behind the Big N buildings. They were unpainted frame and they looked ugly. For that matter, Yancey pondered, the Big N herd, while numerous, was no great shakes. There was no sign of Hereford stock in it. The whole thing was mystifying.

He rode into the yard, behind the corral. He dismounted, trailing the reins. George was at heel. Yancey strolled around the corner of the corral.

A man jerked up a rifle and growled, "Hey! You got no right here!"

It was the cook. Yancey said mildly, "I was just tryin' to bum a handout for m' dog. Got any scraps?"

The man did not look very bright. He said, "Didn't I hear some talk about thet dog? Pribble don't like that damn dog." He did not lower the rifle.

Yancey said, "He's a good dog, only he won't play none. Don't have no fun. You ever seen a dog like that?"

The rifle muzzle wavered. The cook said, "Yeah, once. Wild dog, it was. Wouldn't eat cooked meat."

"Oh, George'll eat cooked meat. Try him," suggested Yancey.

The cook said, "Might do that." He stacked the rifle in a corner of the L of the building and went inside. He certainly was not bright, Yancey thought, getting between the rifle and the door.

THE heel mark in the back of Slavin's had been indistinct, but it was still possible to see that it was a badly cobbled heel, in a country where men were expert in such matters. It had been lop-sided, and it had led to the board walk between the buildings. If the killer had, as everyone thought, merely shot through the window then walked around and joined the milling crowd in Main Street, that heel mark could mean something. It wouldn't hang a man, or even get him arrested, Yancey knew, but it would satisfy Yancey's curiosity.

There were plenty of footprints going in and out of the bunkhouse and around the soft earth where the cook had a haphazard vegetable garden. Yancey did not have to bend to examine them all. His eyesight was rather phenomenal. He strolled a little, staring at the ground.

The cook came out with some meat which had been fried. George approached it, sniffed at it. Then he put up his nose and retreated, growling a little. The cook shrugged. "Y' see?"

"Maybe he just don't like your cookin'," said Yancey.

The man's low brow furrowed, and he glared at Yancey. "Why, you crummy saddlebum, nobody can run down my cookin'." He saw that the big man was between him and the rifle. His mouth hung open, his

eyes distended in growing nervousness.

Yancey leaned over and picked up the meat. He sniffed at it. "If you poisoned it, and I found out, I'd shoot off each ear. Then your legs. Then each finger." He spoke very quietly, watching the cook grow pale. "Thought you were doin' somethin' for Pribble, huh? Well, I'm driftin' right now. But remember—first your ears." He paused, picking up the rifle. The cook screamed suddenly in fear, clapping both hands to his ears.

Yancey broke the rifle and emptied the magazine. George's good ear cocked up, and a growl came from him. Yancey dropped the rifle and said, "I'll be back."

The first of the Big N gang broke through the trees. Someone yelled, and a shot sounded. Yancey walked to his horse and mounted. George lingered, growling. "Come on, dog," Yancey drawled. "You can't fight 'em all."

The shots increased. One went through the window of the kitchen, and the cook howled again. Yancey grinned. Men on horseback are not notoriously accurate. He rode out through the back, around the corral. The black began to run. He heard Pribble's high, strange voice ordering to cut him off. Then George shot out ahead.

The black obediently doubled into the woods. After a while Yancey reined in, and the dog stood braced, pointing a snarling muzzle at the ranch house. Yancey said, "It's plumb funny. Never did see that heel mark."

He waited a while, then rode off to the line and crossed onto Ratchet. He pondered deeply, letting the black trot for the stable. He found Hiram walking up and down, hands behind his back, staring at the ground. Hiram said, "What tarnation fool thing have you done now?"

"Scared a cook," said Yancey. "Hiram, there ain't a heel print on Big N that matches the one I seen behind the Pig-Sty. How come?"

"Slavin," said Hiram. "I keep comin' back to him. He took an awful slangin' from Acton. Then Acton pulled that gun. Then in the end, Slavin was talkin' purty about Acton. That don't hold water."

Yancey said, "I dunno. Slavin raises pigs. That ain't exactly sensible, neither, a neat man like him. Pigs is pigs, and good pork is all right for some, but no man like Slavin belongs with pigs."

Hiram said, "I don't see no profit in this. That gold is just layin' up there in the Coronado, and we're wastin' our time."

Yancey said, "Have you talked much with Peale?"

"He ain't one for much talk," said Hiram.

"Try him," said Yancey. "After supper."

Hiram said, "Now, don't you go gettin' ideas. When you start thinkin', there's never anything in it for us . . . ."

"Git him to talk a lil," said Yancey. He went to wash up and ate without paying much attention to his food.

After dark he loafed in front of the ranch house. There was nice white paint on a picket fence and a fine flower garden. The sun went down, and he saw Red Peale trying to get away from Hiram, who had him by the elbow and was walking him up and down outside the bunkhouse. Peale didn't have a chance, Yancey thought. Hiram was like glue.

Grace Acton sat on the verandah. Yancey walked over to her. The moon had not yet come up, and it was dark as pitch, with the lights out. The girl called, "Come up here, Mr. Clay."

He went to the edge of the porch and sat on the top step. She was back in the deep shadows. She said steadily, "I lied to you. I know why father drank."

"'Spected you did, Miss," said Yancey.

"He blamed himself for my mother's death. He had worked very hard, over on the Panhandle, building a ranch, making money. He worked so hard he forgot that mother wasn't strong. When she died, he was rich, but it didn't mean anything to

him. He . . . he sent me away. I reminded him of my mother, and he couldn't stand seeing me."

"Any old body could stand seein' you, Miss Grace," Yancey said.

She smiled in the darkness, very faintly. "He began drinking because he didn't care any more. He didn't even care about Nate Pribble coming in and fooling around our ranch as if it was his own. Red tried to keep Pribble away, but up until nearly the end, Father didn't seem to care. Then a month ago, he suddenly began to worry. I think he tried to stop drinking. But by then —he had been going on for years—it was difficult for him to stop...."

Yancey said, "Yes. It's hard to stop."

"There was something," she said. "Something that made him begin to think again, to begin to want the ranch."

"The cattle was gone. There's a mortgage?"

"Yes," she said. "Pribble will buy it from the bank. There's no one else in Basket who could."

Yancey said, "Red Peale sure hates Pribble, huh?"

"Of course. They fought many times. Once, in those hills over yonder they had a rifle battle for two days. Red ran him off."

"Must be quite a man," nodded Yancey. He rose, stretching, and his hands touched the verandah roof. "Miss Grace, there was somethin'—I dunno what it is, yet—but somethin' came up. Pribble knows it, your pappy knew it." He did not add that he thought one other might know it. He said, "Thank you for talkin' t' me, Miss Grace. Mostly Hiram does our thinkin'. But this'll help."

He bowed, with amazing grace, and lumbered off. From the shadows, the gray dog ran up and followed him.

Hiram turned Red Peale loose and drifted toward the bunkhouse. Yancey lay flat on his back and listened to his partner's report, which added nothing of value. He lay in the darkness, and his mind went around and around. He was not a fast thinker, but he was thorough and intuitive.

YANCEY said, "Me and George, we're takin' a ride."

"I can't think of nothin'," said Hiram disgustedly. "I done chores around here for a week. I rode around that poor damn herd until I know every critter by heart. My head is achin'. Red Peale talks, but he don't say nothin'. He just keeps sayin' he is going to shoot Pribble. Somehow or other it don't make sense."

Yancey said, "Nope. It sure don't." He climbed the black horse and stared down at his partner. He said, "It's goin' to. Pribble and his boys is gettin' nervous, I see. Ridin' our line every day. Watchin' from the woods. Always watchin' Red. How come?"

"Been expectin' them to shoot. There's a mortgage date comin', and they are seein' that Red don't run off the stock or somethin'."

"Them critters wouldn't bring peanuts in the market today," said Yancey. "I'm ridin', Hiram. You watch around here, huh?"

The little man nodded, scowling. "Might trail you, later."

Yancey said, "Might need you." He rode off, the gray dog running ahead. He had no definite plan; he merely felt the need of action. He could not quite understand the setup. He felt he had a vague understanding, which he had concealed from Hiram because he was not sure, but complete understanding escaped him.

There was something they all wanted. He could feel it in the air. Hiram would not recognize it, because desire for profit was an integral and natural part of the little man's own make-up. But to Yancey it was clear—everyone except Grace Acton was yearning for a showdown which would profit whoever came out on top.

Red Peale, who walked silently in the night when he should have been sleeping,

showed the strain worse than the others. He reined in a big stallion at the edge of the west pasture and said crisply, "I'm thinkin' about stringin' wire. Keep them damn Big N gunsels where they belong."

Yancey said softly, "With the mortgage date comin' up so soon?"

Peale's eyes blazed with hot rage. "Clay, how do you know about that? Who told you?"

"George went down to the bank and looked it up," said Yancey. "Even George would have that much sense."

Peale spurred the stallion close and said through set teeth, "Clay, don't get smart with me. You're workin' for me, see? And don't stick your nose into things. I hired you to—"

"Mr. Acton sent for us," said Yancey pleasantly. "Miss Acton is our boss. You're foreman, Red, remember? I'll see you later —in the Pig-Sty, maybe, huh?"

Peale's struggle for self-control was remarkable. Red-haired men, Yancey thought, had an awful time with their tempers. He grinned and rode off. He described a long circle and went off Ratchet to the north. He had not ridden this way before, but from the ledge where he and Hiram had first surveyed the countryside he had figured the location of the place he sought. It was almost in town, but behind a growth of young timber.

The place itself was small. George ran in, then out. Yancey rode the black past a fence and said, "Persnickety, ain't you, George? It's a healthy smell. They ain't really dirty. They're purty clean, underneath the muck."

The shack was no more than that. There was a pig pen, a large one. There was a grain house, and a long trough half full of slops. The Mexican with the two-wheeled cart who gathered the town garbage had barrels which were for Slavin's pigs.

They were a fine, fat lot. They grunted contentedly as Yancey found a stick and poked them. They were well housed, their trough was long and wide and very deep.

The dog was prowling, nose on ground, going into the shack and out. Yancey heard the first growl and walked away from the pen. He was almost to the shack when the first bullet whizzed dangerously close to his head.

He threw himself prone and whistled for the black horse. The animal swung and came around. Another bullet whined close to him. Yancey grabbed the horn of the saddle and swung up, ducking. George, barking, came racing around the corner of the shack. Then George's feet braced and he slid as he observed the peculiar maneuver of his master. The black horse went on, around the shack and into the trees. But Yancey, dismounting, had only paused to dig his rifle from the boot. He hit the ground running. He went through the window and into the shack.

The dog hurtled behind, then squatted, hackles rising. Yancey knelt, the rifle a toy in his grasp, staring out the half-open door. It was a one-room cabin. It was extremely clean, and the trademark of Pig Slavin was on its orderliness. It boasted windows on three sides and a door on the fourth.

Yancey wished he knew more about Slavin. It was a thing which had puzzled him from the moment he had entered the bar in Basket. He knelt on the floor and knew he would never learn the intricacies of Slavin's personality. Because Slavin was in the shack. He was leaning against the wall, a revolver in his hand. His legs were sticking straight out in front of him. He was bleeding, but not much, from a hole in his left breast. Even in death, his clothing was neatly arranged, his hair was combed, and he was shaven and clean. The expression of his square face was one of slight surprise.

There was a wallet in his inner breast pocket. There was not time to examine it, so Yancey shoved it into his shirt. He had to get back to watching. He hoped that the

shooter who had so nearly winged him was on the same side of the house. He inched toward the door and peered out.

There was nothing moving in the brush. There was no motion in the crescent of the trees. Yancey put a hand over the muzzle of the dog and said, "Not a yip, you hear? We'll just wait out this jasper. If he don't find the black, we might just git one look at him."

His sharp eyes searched. It was morning, and after a while the sun grew very hot, but in the cabin, with four exposures, there was a breeze. Nothing bothered Yancey except the monotony. It was noon before he was certain that the killer was not coming in to make sure that Slavin was dead.

HE EXAMINED Slavin more closely. Then he saw the faint powder marks on the jacket, around the hole. The killer, then, did not have to come in to know Slavin was dead.

The killer and Slavin had been acquainted. There might even have been a shoot-out. Slavin's gun, in his hand, was not fired. But it might have stuck coming out. The dead man was not wearing a shell belt. Guns stuck into a waistband often caught on a man's shirt, Yancey knew.

George was prowling smelling about, whining. Yancey said, "If he's still out there, let him take another shot at us. Either that feller didn't want to kill us, or he ain't no dead shot anyways. C'mon, George. He sauntered through the door. Once in the sunlight he changed pace and leaped about ten feet. Then he walked on, feeling foolish. The black horse responded to his whistle by neighing in the trees, and he wondered if the unseen rifleman had circled and discovered the animal.

He got on the horse and cut the trail, trying to find a track. Someone had been busy with a tree limb while he was hiding in the cabin. The tracks were obliterated. There were no prints of a crooked heel.

He went back to the cabin. He whistled lugubriously, staring at Slavin. Then he put down the switch, lifted the dead man in his arms and deposited him over the cantle of his saddle. The black horse could carry double without stress, he thought, and he hated to leave Slavin sitting there with those wide-open eyes staring at nothing.

He rode into Basket without incident, which did not surprise him. He saw Big N horses at the rack. The Mexican garbage man was tending bar. Yancey rode by the Pig-Sty. The Big N cayuses were lathered, as from a hard ride. He shook his head and went down to Marshal Gillick's office. He dismounted and lifted Slavin tenderly from the horse's back and walked inside. He laid the man down on the floor in front of Gillick's desk.

The Marshal said, "You kill him, Clay?"

Yancey said, "You can look at my guns. Ain't been shot in some time."

"Just asked," murmured the pallid Marshal. "Revolver, up close, huh? Maybe a .45?"

"It wasn't no .22," said Yancey. He told briefly where he had found the body, mentioning the rifle shots.

"Closin' in," nodded Gillick without expression. "Clay, I can't make head nor tail of all this. So I wait. You understand? I'm all the law there is, and I gotta wait."

"You ain't much of a gambler," said Yancey without censure. "I understand, all right."

Gillick shrugged. "It ain't my red wagon. I'm town. I been lookin' into George's killin', of course. But any of 'em coulda done it."

"Acton expected it. He packed a gun, against his regular habit," said Yancey. "You thought about why he carried that ole Peacemaker?"

Gillick said, "Yeah. Have you?"

Yancey said, "Guess it's up to me an' Hiram, then, huh?"

"I'm the law," said Gillick. He looked like a hell of a poor representative of it, but

he would stay neutral, Yancey thought, and that might be helpful.

Yancy said, "Okay. Take care of Slavin. He sure was a neat man to be keepin' hawgs."

"I thought about that, too," Gillick said colorlessly.

Yancey looked out the door. Pribble was coming out of the bar, a crane-like figure, bent and skinny-legged. He was walking down toward the Marshal's office. Ollie Morrow would be somewhere about with a rifle, covering his boss, Yancey thought. Pribble had a look about him of eager expectation. He waited until the owner of Big N walked past him and stared at Slavin. He kept his blue eyes on Pribble's face. The man was a hell of an actor, maybe, he thought. Pribble looked shocked, and then he looked almost scared. He muttered, "Him too?"

Yancey said, "You figger you're next, Pribble?"

The lean man wheeled, snarling, "You and that shrimp pardner of yours brought murder to this town. Gillick oughta throw you in jail now."

"People ain't throwin' me much, lately," said Yancey cheerfully. "It's mostly the other way, remember? Keep your guns clean, Pribble." He walked out and mounted the black horse. George was crouched, glaring at Pribble.

He rode towards Ratchet, then suddenly swung around and headed north. George kept looking up at him, running alongside, as though he could not make out the game. They came to the big ranch and George paused, wrinkling his nose as the wind bore the stench of slop to them.

Yancey picked up a switch and walked to the fence around the pig-sty. He felt the heat of noon-day sun on his back as he scratched at the broad bristly back of a sow with a litter of pink piglets. He stared about, then entered the shack and systematically searched it.

He came out empty-handed and leaned against the wall, remembering the wallet. There was very little in the thin leather. He stared at a picture of Slavin in a far different costume than he wore in Basket. This was a young Slavin who wore a gray uniform with a tall hat and a cockade. He stood ramrod straight, a saber curving over his right elbow. The black braid and long-skirted coat were the badges of the Military Academy at West Point, New York.

Yancey nodded. There were a couple of bills and a letter from a woman back East, which he read, then burned, stamping out the ashes. The feeling he had had about Slavin was right. There was a woman in the life of each of these misfits in the West, he had found. Slavin's story was nothing to interest anyone in this country.

It was enough to know the reason for Slavin's orderliness of habit; it was plenty to know he had been in some kind of trouble back East. There was, then, a good reason for Slavin desiring quick money. He wanted to return to his home, to show that a black sheep could make his fortune, make a new start. That was enough for Yancey to know.

He went out again, thinking. After a moment he thought he saw something in the trees, a moving body. He caught up the reins, remounted the black horse and departed for the Ratchet. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

It Was the Gold

UP ON the ledge overlooking Basket Valley, Hiram said, "Don't understand who'd wanta kill Slavin. What for? Pigs?"

"Maybe," said Yancey. "This here dog still won't play. . . ." He threw a rock, and George went over to it, but did not display any interest.

"Damn the dog," said Hiram testily. "I'm ready to haul outa here. Miss Acton loses the ranch tomorrow. We ain't goin' to git paid. You'll let her cast them big

eyes on you, and we won't take the money. Red Peale ain't got nothin' but a case of nerves."

Yancey said, "You been watchin' him. What about him?"

"Keeps ridin' that line between Ratchet and Big N. Keeps ridin' down towards Slavin's pig-sty, then comin' back. Keeps walkin' the floor. I swear that man don't sleep."

Yancey said, "You think he's sweet on Miss Acton?"

"That is a funny thing," said Hiram. "He don't spoon around her none. She seems so helpless an' everything—why I almost get to feelin' sorry for her myself, and us without a two-bit piece to git to the Coronado. But Peale, he don't sashay around her at all."

Yancey nodded. "Noticed it myself. Miss Grace'd be plumb lonely if I didn't talk to her."

"You!" said Hiram disgustedly. "Women, dogs, poor folks. That's your favorite company. There ain't no profit for us in that." He picked up a large stone and hurled it savagely.

The rock ricocheted off a small boulder. It struck the ledge in a shaded spot. Flecks of stone sprayed about. George wheeled and raced, barking happily, picked up one of the pieces and brought it to Yancey, wagging his tail and lolling his tongue.

"I'll be doggoned," said Yancey. "George likes them ricochets. Won't run after a plain tossed rock. It's gotta bounce off corners! Now ain't that dog somethin'? . . . ." He broke off as though someone had shot the tag end of his words from his mouth. He stood, staring at the rock in his hand.

He turned, the indolence gone from him. He handed the rock to Hiram and stepped across to where the thrown stone had hit. He bent and examined the ledge. He whistled, long and low, and George came nosing to his side, tail wagging.

Hiram was down alongside him, his big jacknife in hand. He was prying at the rock, and for once the little man's hands shook so he could scarcely work. After a moment, he stopped, collapsing onto his haunches. He said, "No use. Of course it's there. That's it. That's the whole thing."

Yancey said, "Hiram, duck! Roll and duck."

The two men lay down and rolled. They got behind a boulder just as bullets whizzed past. Hiram said, "Glasses. They been watchin' us all along. When we found it, they were ready."

The crossfire drummed. Even the splinters had the tell-tale dull glint of the precious metal.

They lay behind the rocks, their rifles twenty feet away, hanging from their saddles. The buckskin and the black had been in fights before, but had never learned to like hot lead. Yancey said, "They got us unless we can get a gun. Hold still, pardner."

Hiram slammed an elbow into his middle as he tried to get up. "You big dumbhead, this ain't your work. . . ." He relaxed a moment as the rifle fire increased. "At least there ain't no one above us . . . yet."

Yancey said, "They all know. George Acton found it out, and was tryin' to sober up and make use of it. That's why he sent for us. But whiskey had him. Slavin knew. George had told him, maybe when he was drunk. So Acton was scared Slavin would talk, and like all drunks, he was abusin' the man he should've played cozy with. We come in, then. Pribble seen we was hired guns. That made him edgey-like. Pribble stood to take it over. All he needed was George Acton dead and the mortgage date due."

Hiram said grimly, "Slavin killed Acton. . . ."

"Ain't proved," said Yancey. He thought of the picture of the slim man in the tight uniform. "You thought of somethin' else?"

Hiram said, "Uh-huh. Grace Acton don't know it."

The rifle fire spurted, then dropped off. The attackers were trying to get above them. Hiram suddenly took off. He could move with a zig zag pace like a scared coyote. The bullets sang around him, but he collected the rifles. He got the horses behind some large boulders and slid one gun along the surface of the ledge. He stayed with the horses. It gave the pair more country to inspect at leisure.

Yancey saw something moving in the trees and fired off-hand, a long, downhill shot. A man yelled. "Lop Ear, I reckon," he grinned. He swung around, staring upward. 'If they made that. . . It would take them time. There was no trail to the rim of Willow Ridge. They would have to go afoot. He reckoned the time.

He said, "There's only one way, Hiram. Make your break first. I'll cover. Then I'll depend on you to lead some of 'em off."

Hiram said, "Where we goin'? You know a safe place?"

"There ain't no safe place in Basket Valley for you and me," said Yancey grimly. "It's play Injun from now on, pardner."

George was at his side, belly to the ground, fangs bared. George's one ear was standing straight up, the other strove desperately to join it and failed. The dog was company, all right. . . .

Hiram said, "Gold! Damnedest thing I ever seen. A whole ledge of it, right here. If it wasn't for that dog, we never would've knowed it."

Yancey said nothing. He had known there was something more than land and cattle. He had certainly not expected to find this ledge of mother lode sitting right in the bright sunshine. They had all been clever, leaving it like this, making no effort to get the ore out until it was safe to do so.

HIRAM made his bid. His heel hooked to the saddle, he was lying along the barrel of the buckskin, clattering onto the loose shale. It was the riskiest ride a man could make. Yancey had never understood why this Yankee from New England could ride better than most born and bred Texans, but there it was. He leaned on the rock, half-exposing himself, and began firing at the woods. He laid down a steady barrage of shots, refilled the rifle as the buckskin slid and shuttled down the shale.

From under the neck of the horse, Hiram was shooting as fast as he could pull the trigger. There was a break in the rock, and Hiram and the horse went out of sight. Yancey lined up his sights and shot three times into the woods, and the enemy fire stopped. The silence was almost loud.

Yancey waited with bated breath for the yell of triumph which would mean Hiram was down. It came, and he could breathe again.

George whimpered. Yancey said, "Uh-huh. It's time for us to go. But we can't quite make it. We ain't as little as Hiram."

He slid to his saddlebags and got out some shells, filling his belt and his pockets. He put his hand on the black and debated. This was a fine horse. He hated to think of losing this mount. In years he had not owned a horse that suited him so well.

He said, "George. You reckon you can take him outa here?"

The dog tried to stand up on its hind legs and lick Yancey's face. Yancey said, "Down. You'll git shot. . . . George, I want you to go with Blackie, see? Take him down. You go first. . . ." He rolled a stone, pointed to it. The dog had enough wolf in him, he thought, to get the feel of the order. That wild strain recognized the need for flight. He said sharply, "Go on, George. I'll be down later. Go on!" He slapped the horse on the flank. The black jumped and started eagerly off in the opposite direction from that which Hiram had taken. George raced ahead, turned once to look reproachfully back at Yancey.

Yancey couldn't even cover them with rifle fire. He waited only until the guns of the Big N began pounding. Then he turned and darted for a fissure in the rock. He got

a toe hold and started climbing. He had to get to the top before the opposing team got there.

He kept sliding back. He was at a disadvantage climbing, because his great weight offset the strength of his arms and legs. His rifle bothered him, slung over his shoulder, but he had to have the rifle. He figured he might get a better long view up top of Willow Ridge and be able to pick off a few of the opposition.

It was necessary to reduce their number, he thought. They were, at present, too many.

He understood a lot of things, now. He understood how Pribble had kept the wild bunch under control. He understood why Acton and Slavin had been killed and he was pretty sure he could name the man who had killed them both.

He began to sweat. He kept imagining there were noises above him. Pribble would only have to send two men up there, and Yancey would be a dead pigeon. The sides of the fissure were steep and glassy. He caught a root growing from a crack and heaved himself a couple of feet higher.

If the devils had killed the horse and George, he panted, he would see them all in their native hell, burining in their own fires. . . .

Hiram could keep a few of them busy. He heard renewed firing and thought that maybe Hiram had got behind them and was creating a diversion. That could save the horse and the dog. . . .

He could see the crown of the hill, now. He struggled up. He got a good toe-hold at last and made progress. He swung himself from a stout vine, got a boot heel purchase and leveraged his big body over the crest, rolling on the hot surface of hard rock, staying low to keep from sky-lining himself.

His luck held. The bullets were hitting the stone around him. He had time to draw his gun. His long, slender hand cradled the Colt's as he found a small rock and tried to get his big frame behind it. Two more shots ripped at his clothing.

He saw the face behind the gun. It was stupid, frightened. The finger was jerking at the trigger, throwing off the aim of the man behind the weapon.

Yancey threw one seemingly careless, angled shot. The man shrieked, threw up his hands and flopped over. Yancey lay still, looking for more enemies. None appeared. He crawled over and stared at the dead man. It was the cook from the Big N.

"What do you know?" murmured Yancey. "Like I promised him." The bullet had gone through his head. The cook was very dead.

Yancey wriggled like a python across the ridge. There was some sparse growth, and he made good time through this, until he came to another split in the face of the rock. He wormed his way down, using the same tactics which had brought him safely to the top. It was much easier going down, although he had the uncomfortable feeling that he might at any moment become a target for the men below.

He heard faint shots from time to time. That would be Hiram. No one in the whole West could beat the little man in a running fight against odds. He had an amazing faculty for shifting terrain and harrassing the flanks of pursuers. Down in Mexico they had, between them, eliminated an entire company of Rurales one time. . . . That was when Hiram had joined the revolution to find gold. . . .

Yancey reached the bottom at last. He was in the west pasture. The shooting did not cease. Big N was fighting a private war with Hiram Goodloe. Yancey trudged across the pasture. He gained the house late in the afternoon.

It was empty. He ran out to the corral and got a rope on a cayuse big enough to carry him a short way. He reloaded his rifle and revolver with great care and then rode off. He felt a terrible urge for speed, more speed than any horse possessed.

IT WAS the gold, of course. And Clay was reckless, going in, because he was thinking of the girl. There was no sign of life about the pig ranch of the dead Slavin.

Behind him a voice said, "Drop it, Clay."

He said quietly, "What's the matter, Red? Where you been? The Big N had us holed up on a ledge. We kept lookin' for you."

He turned around, the revolver dangling in his hand. He could take a pot shot, he thought. He would have to take some kind of shot. He could not go against that voice without trying something.

"All right, Clay," said the voice. "Walk this way, then. You can see it ain't no use. I've thought of everything, I tell you."

Yancey stared. Then he said, "Well, now. . . You did, huh?" The girl was tied hand and foot to a chair. The chair was in the doorway, and Red Peale was behind it. There was a gag in the girl's mouth, and she did not seem to be more than half conscious. Yancey saw red marks on her arms, and for a moment, he almost took a chance. But most of Peale was covered by her and Peale held in his hands the most deadly firearm in the West—a sawed-off shotgun.

Peale said, his voice going into a higher register, "Walk slowly. When you get on the porch, drop the gun."

Yancey's fingers opened reluctantly.

Yancey said, "You sure had it figgered, Red. How about lettin' us in? There's plenty gold for all. Yer goin' t' kill the gal and make it look like it happened in the fight with Pribble, ain't you?"

"You're too smart," said the strained voice. "I almost had you the other day. . . ."

"Sure," nodded Yancey. "I come in purty quick after you got Slavin. He was still bleedin' a little."

"He knew too much," gibed Red Peale. "Like you and your pardner. I'm takin' you one at a time. I got you now. I'll git him later."

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Yancey said, "I figgered you had to get to Slavin on account of George Acton had told him. George was tryin' to snap out of it and he thought Slavin was his friend."

Peale said, "It's mine, see? I worked long and hard for this. Maybe it ain't the way I shoulda, but I'm in, now."

"If George was alive. . ." said Yancey. He raised his voice. He said, "George woulda split with you. Maybe the gal would. . . ."

Red snapped, "Lower your voice, fool."

The man's voice had grown very thin. Yancey tried to gather himself without showing what was in his mind. He said, still loudly, "George . . . He was in the tough spot. . . ."

A gray streak came around the corner of the house. Yancey dived. He just took off and dived straight into the twin muzzles of the shotguns. There was no way of escaping them. His only chance, he well know, was to go into them.

His hands caught Red's thighs, lifted him, tossed him against the wall. He knelt as Red crashed, sank to the earth. Yancey clawed for his Colt, but he was too far away.

A cool muzzle nosed him. He reached. His fingers touched metal. The mouth of the gray dog opened gently, and his tail wagged in great joy.

Yancey stared down at dog and gun. Then his grasp was true and as Red's weapon cleared, he touched the trigger. The Colt in his hand leaped a little, and the sound filled the room. Red Peale screamed in pain. His revolver slid away from his bloody hand. . . .

Yancey drew his knife and slashed at the rope which bound the girl. She fell limply against him, and he tried to rub her wrists and ankles and fan her and hold her up all at the same time.

THE thunder of hoofs interrupted him. He dropped Grace Acton upon the clean bunk, which had been Pig Slavin's. He

knelt in the doorway, ignoring the moaning Peale, waiting with the two revolvers balanced. Morrow's evil face looked along a gun barrel.

Suddenly, from behind the sty, came the sound of shots. Hiram had arrived!

Pribble, riding a great white stallion, came from quite the opposite direction. This put him behind Hiram. Hiram shot Morrow between the eyes. Battle, the ex-prizefighter, tried to empty a rifle at short range, but Yancey fired and watched Battle fall.

Yancey leaped from the doorway and saw Pribble raise the gun to shoot Hiram in the back. Yancey fired three times, running at full speed as he did so. Pribble tried to keep his seat, to ride it out, driving the white horse at Yancey. The big man stepped aside, reached up a long arm and got hold of Pribble. Pribble came out of the saddle and hung, limp as a rag, over Yancey's arm. The life drained out of him.

Hiram said, "Been leadin' these hombres all over creation. Where you been forted up, you long-legged, no-good?"

Remembering, Yancey wheeled and dived for the cabin. Red Peale, one arm helpless, was against the wall. There was a lump on his head. Grace Acton was standing, her slim legs spread, with the shotgun in her hand. She said, "He . . . he tried to get away. I had to hit him."

Peale said hoarsely, "Just lemme get a hoss, Clay. They . . . they'll hang me."

"Naturally they'll hang you," said Yancey. "I 'spect them boots with the bad heel is in your duffle at the ranch. I noticed you're wearin' new boots. It makes it all seem right sensible if you got a pair of boots with bum heels. . . ."

"He's a bad cobbler," said Grace Acton. She was leaning, staring at Peale. Her eyes were bright, and she was in full control of herself now. "He does everything well but leather work. His bridles were always patched. . . . He can't use leather tools."

Bed Manners

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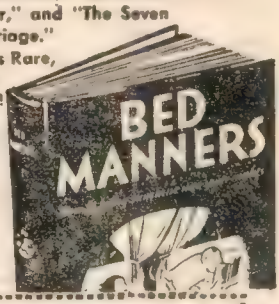

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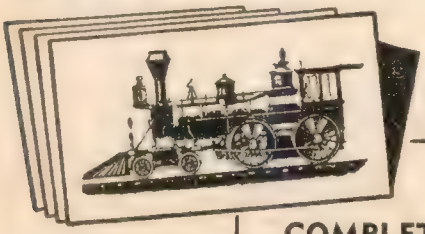

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Yancey said, "Yeah, Red. They'll hang you, all right. You killed Slavin. You admitted that, to me and Grace, when you thought you was goin' to kill us. But Slavin—he was halfway in with you."

Yancey was watching the foreman. He said, "You got less of thet fever now, huh, Red? What you did is beginning to bother you, isn't it? You killed the man who paid your wage."

Grace Acton said, "Yancey!"

"Sorry, Miss Grace," he said. He swallowed hard. "I hate t' see a man go to jail, only to know he's gonna be hung. It was the gold. . . . It got him. He seen Pribble discovered it. He seen George Acton find it. He knew he would never git anything out of it exceptin' wages, and it galled him, because he felt he was the best man."

Yancey said, "You shot George Acton, and then walked around and joined the crowd."

"I done it," said Peale. "Gimme a chance, Yancey."

Hiram said disgustedly, "I'll give you a chance—at the end of a rope. I'll pull it. Shootin' a man in the back. . ."

"He had that Peacemaker and he knew I had found the gold," babbled Peale. "I walked in, lookin' for you and didn't see nothin' but George sittin' there with that big gun. I didn't know it was empty. . . . I thought he was layin' for me. . . . Slavin was there. I thought maybe he knew, and anyway Slavin wanted to let the gal in on it. . . ."

Yancey said, "Peale, here you are." He broke Peale's own gun, made sure there was a single cartridge in it. "No horse, Peale. Just take this and walk into them woods, where the lady can't see you. It's better'n a rope."

Peale took the gun in his left hand. He stared at it, at Yancey. He walked past them, into the shadows. His head was down, and his feet stumbled in the new boots.

Grace Acton dropped the shotgun with

a clatter. She leaned close to Yancey, shaking like a leaf. "Trust!" She laughed hysterically. She said, "Oh, Yancey, now none of us get the gold. The bank takes over tomorrow. Oh, Yancey, it is gruesome. All the dead men, and the bank gets the gold for which they died!"

Yancey said, "Now, Miss Grace, don't fall to pieces." He drew her along with him, toward the pig-sty.

He said, "The Mexican's been too busy to bring slop. Them hogs sure do eat, don't they? Look."

The level of the slop was low. The hogs were rooting among irregular lumps of rock. The yellow light reflected a duller yellow.

"Them nuggets musta been in plain sight," said Yancey. "Red brung 'em down and put 'em in the slop. He hadda let Slavin in on it, and anyway Slavin knew, because your pappy had told him. They'll easy pay off the mortgage. No bank is goin' to try anything funny like that, Miss Grace. You got to learn to trust folks. . ."

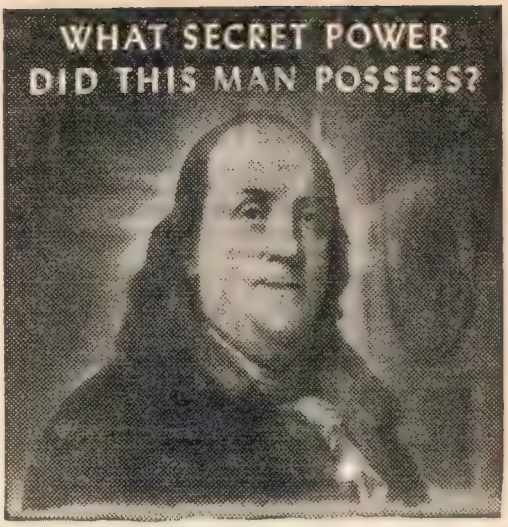
She said, "Yancey. . ." There was the sound of a single shot.

She shuddered, inside the loose circle of his arms. She said, "So much violence. . . So many dead men. You've got to stay and help me, Yancey. This has been too much for me. You'll stay, won't you?"

He held her away. He said, "I'm plumb sorry, Miss Grace. . . ." He stared into her wide brown eyes. He said lamely, "Hiram's so crazy 'bout gold. Reckon he'll stick around and see it come out, if you pay him."

She said, "Yancey. . ." The dog was leaping about, yapping. Hiram stopped at the edge of the sty, staring as though he thought Yancey had gone daffy.

Yancey tightened his grip. He said, "Hiram, go find somethin' for George to eat. Can't you see the dog's hungry?" He glared at his partner and put his arms more tightly about Grace. ● ● ●



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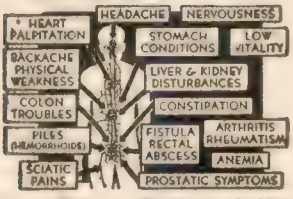

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(Continued from page 8)

"That don't make sense," said Yank. "What did he mean?"

"He meant that a lot of folks around here were as guilty as he was, in the long run. Here's why: He took a big paper bag into th' Green Hat Bank at one o'clock, as you know. At gun point he made th' cashier fill it with assorted money. Gold pieces, greenbacks, an' stuff. He had his horse out front ready to take him far away. That's why he didn't care who knew who robbed th' bank. He never intended to come back here again—to a town where everybody knew him, but didn't know he was so crooked. Well—when th' paper bag was full, he backed out th' bank door, keepin' his gun leveled at th' cashier. A stray dog happened along, an' he tripped over it. His gun went one way, an' th' paper bag broke an' th' coins an' bills flew all over th' sidewalk. Th' cashier jumped out and hopped on Long Jim until a crowd came runnin'."

"Then they gave him a quick trial an' decided to hang him," said Yank Yost. "That's all they was to it."

"No, that ain't all they was to it. You see, Yank, when the money hit the ground, the crowd that gathered picked it up. When th' original excitement died down, they wasn't a cent of th' bank's money in sight. Everybody had scrambled for it, and pocketed it. Although nobody admitted they had any of it, seems like everybody had some of th' loot but th' man what robbed th' bank. So—just as he was about to get hung, Long Jim raised th' question —who really robbed th' bank? Him or th' folks that got th' money? He said that they was at least as guilty as he was.

"What happened then?"

"Then th' sheriff stepped forward an' said, 'You're wrong, Jim. Th' folks merely picked up th' money so it wouldn't get lost. They aim to turn it in. To prove it, I'll pass my hat now. Everybody what

is holdin' th' money, put it in this hat!"

Yank Yost smiled. "An' they turned it all in?"

Sven shook his head. "Not a cent. Not one person in that mob admitted having any of that money. Yet everybody, including the man we was goin' to hang for takin' it, knew that the money was in th' crowd. When Long Jim pointed this out the crowd kind of quieted down, and started to leave. Nobody said much. It was quiet as death. Soon, nobody was left there at th' hand tree but me, th' sheriff an' Long Jim. All we could do was take th' noose off Jim an' let him go. However, me an' th' sheriff felt we oughta get somethin' out of th' mess, too. So, we took his horse an' th' few dollars he already had an' told him to get out of town. He went—and that's all they is to it. You lose your ten dollar fee. Th' city can't pay you for a grave dug for a livin' man."

"But Long Jim Henry is a dead man," said Yank Yost. "I oughta know."

The undertaker called the sheriff. The sheriff called the town council and the mayor. Within an hour a large committee went out to the graveyard to find out whether Long Jim Henry was alive or dead. A quick examination of the big, battered man down in the new grave led the committee to decide that Long Jim Henry was as dead as it was possible to get.

The question then came up as to how he got to be so dead. Yank Yost explained in detail, ending up with the words, "—An' now, if you'll all get th' hell out of here, I'll cover this corpse up. Then I'll come in an' collect my fee. I got a big weekend ahead. Awful big weekend. And wet."

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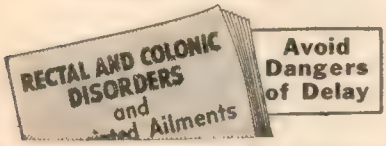

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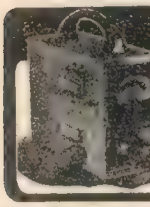

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(Continued from page 67)

"YOU gun-sharks are a tough breed," the doctor said. "I put you to sleep last night, and expected to plant you in boothill this morning."

"Gun-slick!" Deveraux managed to say above the pounding in his head. "I never hired out my gun in my life. I hire out brains, only this time I didn't use any."

"That's what the lady told me," the doctor grinned. "But you did all right. Bannister hasn't come to yet; Romel's dead. Trent will live. Murder, post office robbery, alley fighting. What's this town coming to?"

"Next time a man's murdered," Deveraux told him painfully, "don't let the guy smile. Twist his yawp out of shape before some woman sees it."

A puzzled look came over the good doctor's face.

"Never could understand," he said, "what makes folks like you tick. You can come in now, Brenda."

She came in, moved across the room, knelt at the bed, tears in her eyes. She started to say something, but Deveraux put his fingers over her lips.

"Hold it, kid," he said, "until I'm strong enough to take it. You're hard on a man. I'll talk to you later."

She kissed his fingers, smiled with eyes that had a way of stirring a man. "What will you have to say to me then, Art?"

"For the first time in my life," he told her, "I'm really going to propose to a woman, and mean it, for life. I hope you'll be in the mood."

"I will," she said, and she took his fingers from her lips and kissed him on the mouth.

He found himself wondering if she'd be willing to go back to Wyoming with him, or would she insist on living on the Colderman place. He found that he didn't care. Either way would be all right. ● ● ●

(Continued from page 76)

voice deadly. "Tell 'em how you and Bill robbed Old Man King and then knifed Gus. Tell 'em how you figgered—"

With a snarled oath, Shag Wilson leaped far to the side and stabbed for his gun. Pecos' first bullet went through the space where the man had been. His second went through Wilson's chest. Wilson was arrested in the middle of his draw. Sluggishly he tried to lift the heavy gun, but the effort was too great. It slipped from his fingers, and he sagged forward to fall face downward.

Dave was beside him instantly, rolling him over. "Shag, is it true? Did you rob the old man and kill Gus?"

"Yeah." Shag's voice was just a husky whisper. "We had it planned slick, but we got—too smart. The money's—in the shack."

Someone took the ropes off Curly while Pecos stared gratefully down at the letter in his hand, addressed to Bill Black at the Bench K Ranch. He had gambled that Bill Black was the Blackie who had started for town with Shag Wilson; but if Shag hadn't broken under pressure, he wouldn't have been able to prove anything.

Dave approached him in obvious embarrassment. "I reckon we all owe you boys an apology," he said, with sincere regret. "If you still want jobs in this country, I reckon the Bench K will take you on."

Pecos sat down suddenly, his back against the wall, his head in his hands. Curly dropped on one knee beside him, trying to lift a numbed hand to his shoulder.

"You all right, Pecos?"

"All right?" Pecos looked up blankly. He brushed a hand over his forehead, then swiped the palm against his overall-clad leg. Finally he grinned, quizzically. "Pard, I'm better'n all right. I'm a miracle. Only man I know of that can get on a three weeks drunk in one night!" ● ● ●

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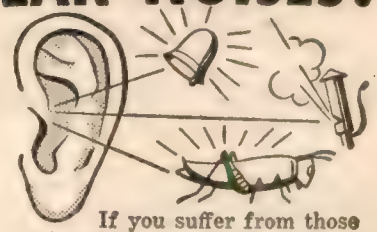

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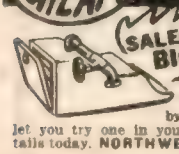

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(Continued from page 83)

staggered crazily on, the weight of the girl nearly dragging him down now. His eyes were fixed dazedly on the tracks in the sand ahead of him—Big Bill's tracks! They seemed to weave crazily from side to side. Or maybe it was the spinning of his head that made the tracks look like that.

Hours seemed to pass. Jeff wobbled on, dazedly, almost blindly. He stumbled over something sprawled in the sand, and he stared at it stupidly. He knew he was crazy. That couldn't be Big Bill lying there!

A strange cackling laugh came to Jeff's throat. He knew it was insane, but so was everything else. He was imagining things that couldn't be happening. He thought he had Big Bill upon his back, carrying him. He thought he saw men on horses coming toward him. It was all too impossibly absurd. . . . Soon he would wake up and find he had been dreaming.

Jeff felt something cool on his head. He opened his eyes. He looked at the low ceiling of the room, and wondered where he was. He heard the creak of a chair beside him, turned and looked at Sue Harmon sitting at his bedside, dipping cloths into a basin of cool water.

The he remembered those hellish miles of heat and thirst in the desert. Some miracle had saved them. It seemed a miracle too that Sue was here, putting damp cloths on his brow. She should be with Bill Powers. She and Bill were going to be married.

"How do you feel?" Sue's voice came to him softly. "You've been unconscious a long time."

Jeff wagged his head weakly. "I'm all right," he said huskily. "Where's Bill? Is—is he okay?"

Sue looked at him strangely, then turned her eyes away. When she looked back at him, her face was expressionless.

"He's dead," she told him slowly. "He was dead when they found us, out on the desert. You were carrying him, Jeff, trying

to save him. Even after—" Her voice trailed off.

Jeff swallowed a great lump in his throat. He was confused and awkwardly distressed. "That's too bad," he found himself saying. "I'm sorry, Sue."

Sue was silent a moment, then went on in a strange voice. "Why pretend any longer, Jeff?" she said. "I know what happened out there. I—I saw you take Bill's gun. I watched you pick up the canteen after he had emptied it. You thought that would hurt me, didn't you? It did, but not for long. It was like losing a piece of glass and finding a diamond to take its place. Do you understand what I mean, Jeff?"

Her hand slipped out and found his own, and Jeff saw the moisture in her eyes. He understood, then, why happiness sometimes makes a woman cry. That was all he wanted to understand. ● ● ●

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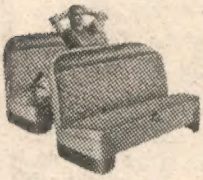

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